

SIMPLE SIMON SMITH

DALE COLLINS



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SIMPLE SIMON SMITH

THE STORY—

Never was a stranger yachting party than that on the *Stormalong*; yet the fantastic adventures of the owner and her crew have an odd reality, and their bizarre homicidal plots, their devices and manoeuvres are as convincing as the happenings in a dream to the dreamer. If the much-married, much-courted Countess, and the peculiar and dubious friends attracted by her millions, are mad, they are but mad north-north-west and know a hawk from a handsaw.

What happened to the Count is but one of many problems arising on a Mediterranean cruise which certainly hasn't a dull moment. The tale twists and twines through a labyrinth of amusing roguery from climax to climax. And through it all, uncomplex and ingenuous, moves Simple Simon Smith, once a prisoner-of-war, later a prisoner of life and marriage, who puts out from Jersey one summer's night on a rubber tube and escapes to the strange freedom of perilous seas which he navigates serenely by reason of his sheer simplicity and innocence. Perhaps, however, the lovable peasant Adonis is wiser in his guilelessness than all the astute rascals.

A story which provides sparkling entertainment touched at times by pathos and beauty, and with an inner significance for those who seek it.

SIMPLE SIMON SMITH

By

DALE COLLINS

Author of

*The Happy Emigrants; Winds of Chance;
Ah, Promised Land!; Ordeal,
Etc., Etc.*

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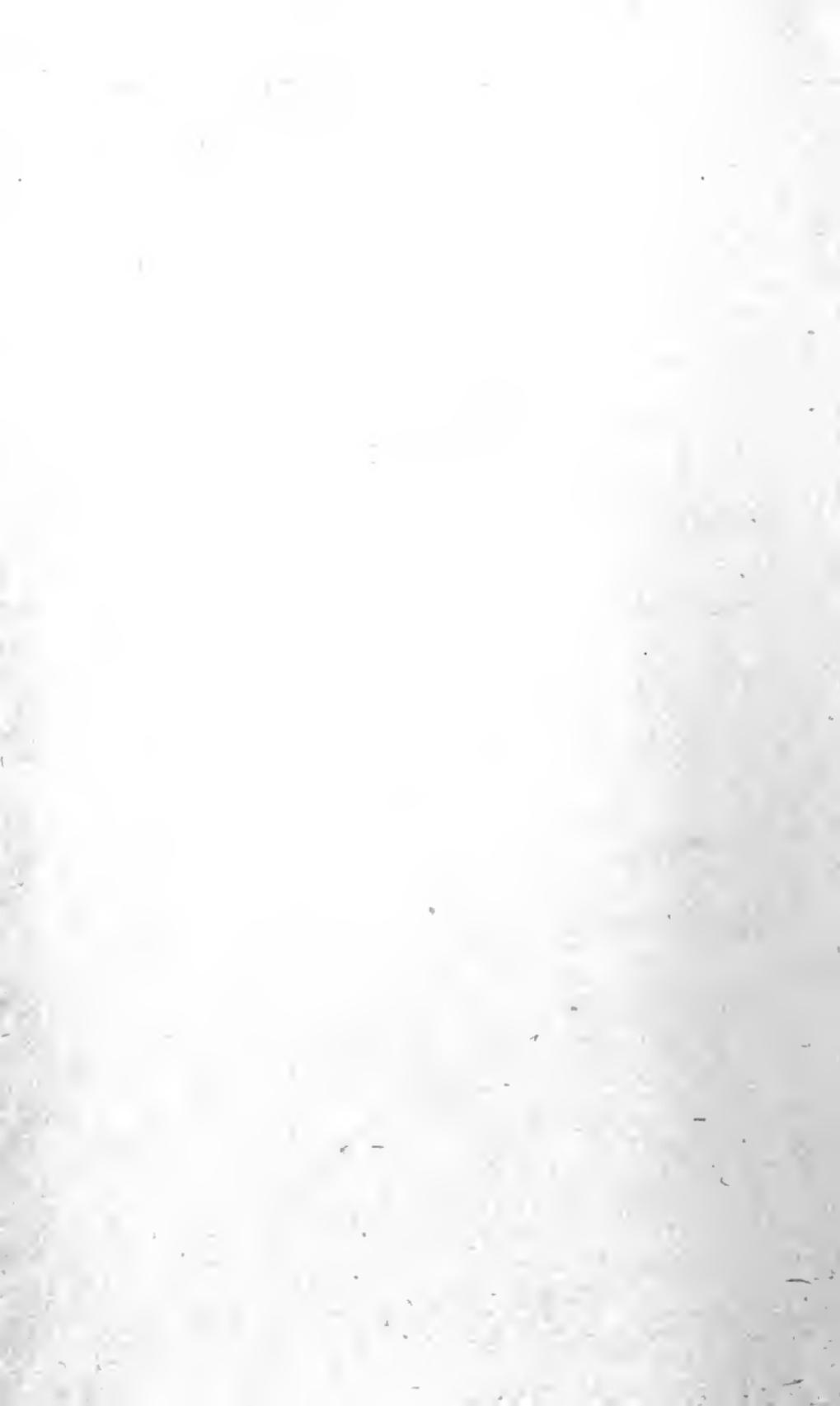


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To
S. K. COLLINS
who will find Simon a man after
his own heart

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*All the characters in this book are purely imaginary
and have no relation whatsoever to any living person.*

CHAPTER ONE

I

LIKE many another parent Mrs. Smith had failed to see the flaw inherent in the name she had chosen. To her it had seemed that Simon was just right for her wide-eyed and wondrous baby—uncommon and with a bit of style without being fancy. The alliteration chimed happily. In the circumstances Mr. Smith didn't care what she called the kid. But at school, of course, and in the village, in the Royal Air Force, in the prisoner-of-war camps, and home again, Smith always and inevitably was Simple Simon. Oddly, it fitted him to perfection, but no one will ever know just how much the name conditioned the child and the man.

In the whiteness of the moon Simon floated on the still surface of the sea, naked and at ease, like the figure of some god out of old mythology. Conch-shells should have sounded strange and sweet music; shining dolphins should have played about. His strong body with its flowing lines, his shapely head and chiselled features would have delighted Praxiteles, for by queer chance Mrs. Smith's boy had been cast in a classic and heroic mould. He was much the most handsome fellow born in living memory in Royals Bottom—as handsome as any fellow born foreign outside, if it came to that—but he remained Simple Simon.

There he reclined on the bosom of the deep, remote from the world, alone in the great quiet with the lopsided moon and the dimmed stars, dreamy, the long lashes almost closing over eyes so darkly brown that they were nearly black, mind and muscles relaxed after all the tiresome fuss and bustle of the last forty-eight hours.

Though his escape into the night appeared mystical and marvellous it had been achieved by the most prosaic means:

he was cradled in the inflated inner tube of an outsize motor-lorry tyre.

Daphne and Simon had only arrived at their Jersey holiday camp that morning. The Channel Islands had been Daphne's idea. She'd heard that the food was super and the shops crammed with all kinds of things, such as French perfumes and cheap cigarettes and sweets and liqueur chocolates, and even nylons and other delights. She and the girls—they had been drawn together by some natural instinct aboard the boat—had rushed into St. Heliers that afternoon to look about. Daphne had been pleased enough to leave Simon behind. On such an expedition he was exasperatingly dopey. Simon had wandered along the front and fallen into talk with the apple-faced Irish proprietor of a garage. They sat on a packing case in the sun and it was pleasant, blue sea and sky and golden sands spread before them. The Irishman, having naturally something of the poet in him, had been much taken by the quiet, unassuming and beautiful giant from the mainland, who was somehow like a fellow out of the great old stories. When, presently, Simon mentioned with regret that he was no swimmer, the garage man had been enchanted to have the chance to do him a good turn.

"Faith, I've the very thing for you, me boy," he'd said.

And he was right.

Simon had left the tube at the garage. It was a kind of toy and promised to be fun. Not the thing to mention to Daphne, however, or at a gaily boisterous meal. It was private property. He'd never had any real possessions, for they would have irked him, but now and again he chanced on little things and kept them briefly to himself.

Never a dull moment at the camp. Motor coaches were taking the gang to a dance that evening. Jackie's Jivers were to provide music, and refreshments were to be ample at bargain prices. Daphne, who wore her blue, hardly noticed that Simon wasn't going with them. He was apt also to be exasperatingly dopey at a party.

Left in peace, Simon had wandered down again to the garage and he and the Irishman had gone to a small pub which was oddly foreign. The only foreign country Simon had ever been in before was Germany where he had spent long years,

though he hadn't seen any pubs there. All very interesting. They met some real Jersey people, fishermen. Although he was introduced by the Irishman, accepted after twenty years, the brown-skinned, wrinkled men were withdrawn at first. Simon stayed quiet. He was very good at that. And presently the little party thawed, and they drank beer together. It was poor, chemical beer. But there were stories of the German occupation, and such passing things, and presently mention of a black goat who sat on a fence and played the flute and soured all the milk in the cows in the field. Also, as a gesture of friendship, Simon was offered a very simple spoken spell which would stop bleeding, no matter how bad the wound.

Unfortunately, it could only be passed to him through his wife.

So that was impossible because his wife, of course, was Daphne.

Simon hardly spoke at all. They discussed him briefly and approvingly in French—or what sounded like French—and only let him stand his round as a matter of politeness, for he had made the evening by just smiling there, his head nearly touching the roof, his interest and attention very sincere, his deep and gentle eyes turning from this one to that.

The Irishman and he had gone back to the garage for a last cigarette, and on a sudden impulse Simon had suggested inflating the tube. This done, they parted like old friends, and the Irishman pressed Simon to come back to-morrow. Simon agreed. He liked this part of Jersey, and his comrade.

Night was falling, an afterglow dying into purple twilight.

Simon went down to the beach. Everybody had gone home. There was only the sea and the sand and the moon which had been up in the bright sky all the time, unnoticed. Now she took her place and began to shine. Simon lit another cigarette, made a comfortable hole in the sand for his haunches, and just sat there. He was glad he wasn't at the dance. Once or twice he patted the tube which the Irishman had given or loaned him—there hadn't been any need to decide which. It felt round and smooth and lively.

The moon brightened and night reigned. Simon tried the temperature of the water. It was warm and soft as milk, for, apart from the heat wave, the happy isle was lapped by a far-

flung branch of the Gulf Stream. Undressing in the shadow of the sea-wall, he walked, a marble statue come alive, down into the sea and launched his peculiar craft with a sigh of content and a schoolboy sense of adventure.

For a while he paddled with his hands, but soon found that unnecessary. The sea carried him along, and very much faster than he realized, for the tide was ebbing at a speed which would leave a mile of sand exposed in no time, and within the tide were powerful currents which towed his ring of rubber and air with invisible hands, drawing it out and away though it seemed to sit so still and quiet on the sparkling sheet of the calm sea, anchored in the brightest path of silver.

Simon's back was turned on the shore. He had had enough of it and people for a while. These last couple of days there had been such a lot of people, crowding in. This was like drifting on a parachute with no landing to face.

He smiled distantly when he thought of Daphne and the gang at the dance. He wasn't at all jealous of the new young man with the patent leather hair and the side-whiskers. Simon had been married to Daphne for years now. There had been going to be a baby, she'd said, though somehow it had never happened. Owing to the exigencies of war he had spent brief time with her but time enough. She had been the little girl siren of Royals Bottom, modelled on film stars. She was still the little girl siren with very blonde hair and a petulant mouth and a shrill voice and giggles. In all the world Daphne was the only person Simon disliked—and even in her case the dislike was mild and remote.

Now he forgot about her and his mind emptied of everything save serene content. It would be fine to drift like this for hours and hours, to see the sun rise, never to go back again.

The moon climbed down and down and slid into the sea. The lanterns of the stars burned more bright and golden and were reflected in the depths so that he seemed to have escaped into space

II

Royals Bottom drowsed in its dip in a fold of the Chilterns. The day had been hot and cloudless, and though the hands

of the clocks neared ten it was really only nine. The trees, massed in smooth bulges on the slopes, inhaled the cooling air and breathing out again scented the evening with the greenness of their leaves. Beetles droned and bumbled, heavy-winged. From the small gardens behind the white-picket fences drifted wafts of stocks and honeysuckle. A bluish haze hung in the air. Five ducks boated on the pond, and two geese dipped their beaks and snuzzled in the shallows. Whatever time men called it, the sun had only just dropped down behind the woods. The ducks and geese weren't fooled, any more than the birds still chattering and busy in the branches.

Royals Bottom wasn't much of a place—a brief glow of old brick cottages along a twisting lane, a tiny village shop, an ugly chapel built of red corrugated iron, and The Pheasant Inn. The nearest small town was twelve miles away, the nearest bus four, the nearest church two. There was also, of course, Chingley Lodge up on the hill, but it really belonged to outside with a telephone and cars coming and going and all that kind of thing. The big house played a very small part in the quiet life of Royals Bottom, except, of course, when Miss Enid brought a boy friend or some other visitor down to The Pheasant. Miss Enid was all right, even though when she wasn't in jodphurs she favoured grey flannel trousers. But everybody knew and liked her. Why, she'd grown up in less than no time from a little baby into a smart girl as pretty as she was clever. She was easier to get along with than any miss from farm or cottage, and a whole sight better than the hikers and motorists and such who barged in briefly with their big bottoms and their loud voices and their cheeky ways of offering drinks that weren't wanted.

Miss Enid had joined in a game of darts that evening. She had with her a military chap with one of those funny long bars of moustaches, like someone in a comic picture. In the ordinary way you wouldn't have taken to him quite, but as he was with Miss Enid that made it different. They were playing against Frank Hall, who'd been in the Air Force, and Bert Gummeridge, who'd gone off to sea in the Navy, but was back now and glad to be. So was Frank. No wonder.

Otherwise just the regulars: Mrs. Jeff and Mrs. Howden behind their glasses of stout, gossiping away as if they'd been

round the world since they'd met last evening; the domino players at their scrubbed table, and three land army girls in the corner, drinking shandy and resting their tired bodies though their faces looked bright enough. And, naturally, the old uns in their places.

Mr. Smith dwelt behind the small, clean bar. He was respected but not liked. He didn't drink or smoke and was strict chapel. He had a mouth like a sprung rabbit-trap and wispy ginger hair going grey. Seeing he was so strict in every way, it was a wonder he could bring himself to keep an inn, but he had taken over from his father and never seemed to have forgiven himself. A grim and soured man with no juice in him. Fair enough according to his lights, but he'd rather have given you a shilling than a smile, which was saying a very great deal. His body was tall and dried and white, like a tree killed by lightning.

Mrs. Smith was there, too, lending a hand. Living with Mr. Smith had drained the life out of her. She looked faded and tired and older than her years. When she'd come to The Pheasant as a young bride—she was a foreigner from Blickington—she'd been pretty as a picture. Everyone had wondered how Mr. Smith had managed to get hold of her, though, of course, he was very warm so far as the money went. Yes, she'd been quite a rose of a girl back in those days, and had seemed too good for lending a hand in the cellar and scrubbing floors, tables and bar. Royals Bottom had been almost afraid of her at first, and hadn't liked her much. Now they were kind to her and sorry for her without quite knowing why.

"Have you heard from Simon over there where he's gone holidaying, Mrs. Smith?" asked Mr. Parker.

"Why, no, my Simon was never much of a letter-writer," she said, but her face lit at the mention of his name and for a moment she was almost the girl from Blickington. "He'll be having a good time. Simon always does. He carries his happiness with him, come what may."

"Aye, he does," said Mr. Parker. "I've often heard young Frank there"—he jerked his pipe at the dart-player—"say how even them Germans couldn't get him down when Frank and he was prisoners. He took it all very quiet, Frank always says."

"That's his way," said Mrs. Smith, "and it's a good one."

"Aye," said Mr. Parker, "the world'd be a better place if more folks took it all quiet." As if reminded by this remark he pointed his pipe at the small battery radio set. "News, Mrs. Smith?" he said.

Ten o'clock was closing time at The Pheasant, though there was no need to worry about that to the minute or half-hour. There wasn't a policeman this side of Blickington, and the chap there wouldn't bother his head anyway. Nominally, the ten o'clock news was popular, for the morning papers didn't come till round noon. Mrs. Smith said "Oh, dear, I'd nearly forgotten." She always said that. She turned the knobs and a dead and cultured voice brought the tidings of the world to Royals Bottom with mechanical perfection.

It was the signal to wind up darts and dominoes and drain glasses for a last one, or possibly two. Otherwise—though if Mrs. Smith had ever actually forgotten there would have been an outcry—nobody really listened or showed any interest. The world of which the brown box spoke might have been another planet, as distant as the moon.

And yet, as the news neared an end with a fractional speeding-up now that it had got down to minor matters, one of those sudden lulls which sometimes occur in a bar descended on The Pheasant. It was almost as if they had been forewarned to listen to this next item.

"A visitor to Jersey is believed to have been drowned last night," the reader ground on, for the words meant nothing to him. "It is feared that he was carried out to sea whilst bathing in the darkness, using a motor tyre tube. His name is given as Simon Smith. He was on holiday with his young wife, and came from Royals Bottom in Hertfordshire."

For an instant the hush endured and tensed. Outside the birds were busy with their bright twitterings of good-nights. Every figure was stilled, paralyzed in the midst of action, so that it was as if the bar had turned into a snapshot of itself. In a frozen group they stared at the alien thing on the shelf which babbled on unheard. It didn't belong in Royals Bottom at all; Simon Smith was none of its business. Never before had it even breathed the name of Royals Bottom.

But it had said—?

They couldn't believe it. Eyes widened and stared incredulously; mouths opened to express doubt and denial, but no sounds came.

Miss Enid's mind was the quickest to comprehend. With a despairing gesture she flung the darts she held in her hand down at the floor. They stuck in the boards, quivering. And as she did so, like a child, she burst out crying, the tears running silver on her brown and lovely face.

"‘I weep for Adonais, he is dead,’" she said—not to them, just to herself.

A queer remark but it sounded right and beautiful somehow.

Mrs. Smith moaned, buried her face in workworn hands, and stumbled blindly out, blundering through the curtain into the unknown private world of that public house. Her husband made no attempt to follow, but stood there, dry and erect, expressionless, a dead tree stump. No one knew what to say to him or to his own neighbour. The box on the shelf played music now. Mechanically Mr. Smith put back his hand and switched off without even glancing at it.

"May I go to Mrs. Smith and see—?" asked Miss Enid, starting up.

"No, Miss Enid," Mr. Smith said, bluntly and finally, and went on to intone, just as usual, "Past time now. All out. Good-night. Past time."

In a way the announcement was a relief. There was much to be said, but they were still stunned. Better to be forced into movement, to escape from the place which was haunted by memories and pictures of Simple Simon. They shuffled out, silent, mourners, into the last of the summer's day. The rooks were busy in the treetops, drifting like smuts.

In the groups they had formed through the evening they went a little away from The Pheasant and stood talking in hushed voices, fumbling for words, still feeling that there must be some mistake. If it had come by one of those telegrams—yes! But to hear such news over the air—that made it seem stranger, as if Simple Simon wasn't really dead but had been whisked away by that big world outside.

"It was no idea of Simple's to go traipsing off over there,"

said a domino player. "It's all the fault of that little bitch of his. Royals Bottom wasn't good enough for her."

"Aye, at least he's rid of Daph'."

"With the insurance money and all she won't be a widow long, but she won't get the new un round these parts."

"That's true, she won't."

"They'll miss him in the cricket team."

"We'll all miss him. He was like a kind of a friend to everyone was Simple in his quiet way."

The land girls stood apart, digging the dust with the toes of their clumsy boots.

"It doesn't seem right," one mourned. "Think of all the swine there are about, and yet it had to be old Simple Simon."

"Wish we'd been here before she landed him. He could have made a peach of a husband."

"She got him when he was young. As soon as he went into the R.A.F. They tell me he fell for Daphne going to have a baby. Her!—knowing all she knew even then!"

"And after a couple of nights away he went, and never came back for years. Daphne had a nice war all right. Trust her."

"What I can't make out is how the Smiths ever managed to breed him," said the girl who helped with the prize stock up at the Lodge. "It always seemed to me as if a pair of old cab-horses had turned out a Derby winner. In a way it's no wonder he died young. He didn't belong really—not here. He shouldn't have had to stay put in a dump like this with that Daphne."

The two ex-servicemen were together, a miniature British Legion meeting mourning a comrade.

"Simple had a funny life, come to think of it, but then he was a funny fellow," said Frank. "Look at it this way—he was born and reared here, and went in as a bit of a kid. Did his training over at Blickington. That was a marvel. They generally sent you t'other end of England. Then he was shot down on his very first mission. Way back in early '40. After that for all those years it was just Stalag this and Stalag that, and barbed wire round him. I reckon the bump he got when he baled out made him even more dreamy and simple. Perhaps in a way it was a help. Anyway, old Simple Simon—o'course that name stuck to him over there—was a good type

to have around. He never got rattled. He never got on your nerves. Kind of restful and comfortable, like one of them oaks there. He could take it. I had some of it, but nothing like as much as Simple. In such a short life them years cut a damn great hole."

"Yeah," said Bert Gummeridge, the sailor. "Only a kid, and then a prisoner, and now he's drowned at sea. And here's me, torpedoed twice and lord knows what all, but still alive and kicking. He didn't get much of a break, old Simple."

Said Mrs. Jeff to Mrs. Howden: "A lovely boy 'e was. Pretty as a picture. This'll come hard on poor Mrs. Smith—and of course I mean his mother—not that little bit. Poor Mrs. Smith, she fair idolated him."

"I know," said Mrs. Howden. "And never touching a drop of anything will make it harder for her. I'll bet that Daphne is dancing on his grave, as they say. She did ought to have sent a telegram or something. It's not decent. But then what can you expect—?"

"The pity of it always was that he—"

Mrs. Jeff led Mrs. Howden into her cottage so that they could have a cup of tea and a good long talk.

Major the Hon. Martin Matthews, D.S.O., M.C., hadn't minded the game of darts but he had been looking forward all the evening to the climb back to the house through the darkling woods. He had even wondered whether it mightn't be the moment to propose to Enid. No hope now. She was a million miles away, and wrapt in gloom. Major Matthews felt riled and vaguely jealous. Of course, it was a shock to hear of a villager being drowned, and no doubt he'd been a decent chap and it was stinkin' luck, but dammit all, to burst out crying and quote poetry about the publican's son, and now to be quite unaware that it was the most perfect evening imaginable and that he was there beside her with all kinds of things bubbling inside and bursting to come out—well, hell's bells, it was enough to make anybody peevish.

Much the wisest thing would be to stay quiet, but he wasn't wise where Enid was concerned and he was accustomed to speaking his mind.

"Local boy makes good, eh?" he was dismayed to hear

himself blurting out surlily. "You seem to have been quite that way about this guy Smith."

Enid gave him a queer look, her face pale and small in the twilight.

"You wouldn't understand in a thousand years, Martin darling," she said. "I've been in love with our Simple Simon since I was ten. Of course, he wasn't Adonais, and he'd never heard of Shelley or Keats. But he was a poem of a bloke. A beautiful thing, outside and in. It was as natural to love him as it is to love a St. Bernard dog."

"Good God!" gasped Major Matthews.

"I suppose it was inevitable that he should go on. It always seemed his fate to be a prisoner, that way or this. And it was wrong for him. He should have been a gypsy, a wanderer, a kind of gentle pilgrim. Poor dear Simple Simon. I suppose this was only the third time he ever saw the sea. Once when he flew out, once when he came home to us, and now—!"

It was the fight of his life but Martin Matthews didn't say another word. He hoped his silence would be read as sympathetic and the quiet understanding of a strong man on whom a girl could lean.

Mr. Smith, meanwhile, had finished the nightly routine of clearing up. He had bolted the doors, turned out the lamps, lit the candle, had a last look round, and then clumped out of the bar, and, stooping, ascended the steep and narrow stairs. The windows of the bedroom were very small and it was dark in there. The candle shone golden as a star.

Mrs. Smith lay in her clothes, shoes and all, on her side of the big double bed. Her face was buried in the pillow, and she was silent and still, tearless, numb with woe.

Mr. Smith put the candle down and stood studying her in a meditative way, and hate grew in his small cold eyes.

Presently that smile he so begrudged twisted his lips. A good thing he didn't give it freely, for it wasn't a pretty smile. And yet, somehow, there was grief in its bitterness, regret for a loss suffered long ago.

"I'll leave you to do the weeping and the wailing, Margaret," he said. She made no sign, but she had heard. She didn't guess what was coming next. He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Yes, Margaret," he went on evenly, "this is no

affair of mine, for he was no son of mine, and well I've known it through all these years when it was your great and precious secret."

That had done it. He might well have stabbed her in the back with a knife. She flung over, gripped her breasts and stared at him, so white and rigid that she looked a bit like one of the figures on the graves in Blickington Church.

"I saw with my own eyes," he said. "The gypsy fellow with the fine gold rings in his ears. A night hotter than this. I was there in Fox Spinney. I could show you the very tree I stood behind. So the gypsy got him and the sea has taken him, and good riddance say I."

He turned away, pulled off his clothes to his vest, and climbed into his grey nightgown. Then he bowed his head in prayer as he always did. He felt stern and righteous, the rod of the Lord, a stone in the mills that ground slowly but exceeding small.

And suddenly the sinner, the grave image on a tomb, smiled and shone like a young girl. It was all over now. She couldn't be hurt any more, ever.

III

Not even a grey smear of land on the horizon. Nothing at all save the immense globe of dazzling blue formed by welding of sea and sky. Set in the very centre of this globe a tiny dot, no bigger than a strand of weed, and in this dot Simple Simon Smith.

Long before daylight he had realized that his efforts to paddle back to Jersey were a waste of energy. He was entirely at the mercy of the waters. Only they could take him back, or carry him to another of the islands, or even to France or England. The illusion of being quite stationary, of bobbing at anchor, persisted, but he had learnt that this was, indeed, an illusion. Unseen, unknown, the tides and currents carried him along in their grip. He would only have been moving faster had he been carried on the back of one of those legendary dolphins.

No sign of a break in the weather. There wasn't a wisp of

cloud in the sky, or a breath of breeze. The surface was polished glass, so unflawed that it seemed as if he would only have had to hoist himself upright to walk upon it.

Wherever he was he was far from the haunts of men, and even their ships did not intrude into this solitude. At first he had taken it for granted that he would be seen and picked up by a fishing boat or steamer. Through the long hours, however, he hadn't seen a glimpse of sail or the faintest smudge of smoke from a funnel. Earlier a dot had crossed the furthest wall of sky, but it was so small and his eyes were so dazzled that he could not decide whether it was a plane or a gull.

The sun dropped down into the west now, a perfect circle of fire. Well, he had had enough of the sun and would welcome the night. His skin was scorched scarlet and his whole body throbbed. So badly was he burnt that icy tremors and rigours shook him, setting his teeth rattling against his parched and swollen tongue. For most of the time he kept his eyes closed, but the glare beat on the lids and painted brilliant whirls and stabbing purple spears inside them. Those parts of his skin which had been most in contact with the water were wrinkled and swollen and creased. During the worst heat of the day from time to time he had immersed his whole body, clinging to the tube with one hand. The relief, however, was only temporary, and was paid for later by increased torments.

Thirst parched him, and his stomach was sick and empty from hunger. Simon had experienced both these trials before. German guards who mistook quiet remoteness for insolence had applied both punishments pretty mercilessly. But they hadn't been as cruel as the sea, and the German sun was kind compared with this one.

Simon did not delude himself. He admitted that it looked very much as if he'd had it.

There was nothing to be gained, however, by going into a flat spin. He'd never been one to make a fuss. That kind of thing did no good and was foreign to his nature. If he wasn't picked up within some vague but obviously limited space of time he'd be a gonner. In the end, he assumed, he would slip out of the tube and drown. He didn't want to die—nobody less—but beyond keeping his head and waiting there wasn't a darned thing he could do about it.

At first he had had lots to think about, like them finding his clothes neatly piled there by the sea-wall with the tracks of his feet leading down the beach. He was sorry about the Irishman, who'd be upset. It seemed he wouldn't be able to keep his date with the Jersey chaps. And Daphne? What would she say and do? Well that, at least, didn't matter.

Such thoughts, and recollections of the past, faded as the hours bleached them. It was difficult now to think of anything clearly or for any length of time. His mind had become merely a red-hot coal.

Once, when he was comatose or asleep or light-headed, he was back in The Pheasant with the green, cool trees of Royals Bottom outside the windows. His mother drew him a long, cold, foaming pint of bitter in one of the old pewter mugs with the dents of a century in them. As he put it to his lips he came to his senses, and his lips were sore and bitter with salt.

He didn't try to re-capture the dream. That, he fancied, was the way you started to go barmy, like those chaps in the desert who were lured to death by mirages.

The sun went down. Surprising that there wasn't a great column of steam and a hissing roar. Only the immense quiet, and the colours draining slowly from the world until there was merely silver and the lopsided moon again, a little further across the sky than she'd been this time last night.

Last night? The same moon?

That seemed most strange of all.

The moon was as cool and white as a disc of ice.

The night stroked his burning skin with fingers soft as velvet, but the caress held agony.

After a long time a ship went by—far off, a string of little golden lights drawn on an invisible wire.

Instinct made him try to shout at the top of his lungs. No sound came. That didn't matter. Had his throat been fresh washed by the latest draft of bitter his mother had brought him his loudest shout would not have carried through those shimmering silver miles of silence.

IV

A smell of scent, but it wasn't Daphne's. And it wasn't the kind Herr Kommandant used. It was vastly better than

either, deeper, richer, distilled from some creamy flower. With it an amazing sense of comfort and well-being. Never before had Simon felt so wrapped in luxury, even though he could only appreciate it vaguely for his mind was still fogged. Silk, that was it—he was encased in soft silk, like an unhatched moth in a cocoon. At the back of his mind, however, lurked the shadows of fear and dismay. Perhaps he was dead, and in heaven. Why should he be dead? It was years and years since he had jumped from the blazing kite. Nevertheless his skin still burned, his body was hot from the flames, and his head ached from the collision with the trunk of the tree. All very odd, for at the same time he was so comfortable. He stretched his body a little, and sighed.

"Don't die—don't die after all this time, my precious!" a voice pleaded suddenly and amazingly. "I've won you back from the sea at last, darling. Stay with me now, please, please!"

The sea? That rang a bell. His eyes were sealed up, and he'd no desire as yet to open them. First of all, before he got involved with people and things, he had to recall what had happened. Memory came back slowly, in little pieces bright and bewildering and difficult to fit together, like the jigsaw puzzle his mother had brought back that distant day from Woolworth's. Unhurrying, not to be rushed by that insistent and pressing voice, he fitted the bits together. It took a long time, but that didn't matter. So he hadn't been drowned in the tube he'd got from the Irishman? So he had been rescued? So he hadn't had it?

He evaded the voice that wanted him so badly and slipped off into sleep.

When Simon awakened he was almost himself again. He was in a boat. He could feel it throbbing and living like the one that had brought him home from Germany. His eyes opened to find everything else blocked out by a face which bent immediately above him. The perfume still persisted but now it was fought by a strong reek of brandy. The face was the thing, however. It was a very large face and belonged to a woman who wasn't young. Beneath the heavy mask of paint and powder Simon could see old skin. Spiky lashes framed huge blue eyes which were rather bloodshot. There was a mop of

dyed curls like golden sausages. The big soft mouth was a scarlet bow painted on with a fine disregard for the lips beneath.

Simon had seen such faces before. Large cars brought them to The Pheasant where they stayed briefly spending a lot of money on short drinks, mocked by the thoughtful scrutiny of the locals.

Diamonds hung from the ears, and diamonds encircled the fat and bulgy neck.

Whoever the lady was she was evidently very rich and she appeared to be remarkably fond of Simon and most delighted to see that he had come back to life.

"Ah, at last!"

Her voice was deep and rather hoarse. Tears of joy started into the eyes which were round as a doll's. The tears hung on the spiky lashes. She bent down and kissed him on the mouth, her big bosom pressing like a pillow on his chest. Her fingers held his head on either side, the rings on them cool against his skin. The lipstick tasted sticky. She kissed him in a hungry way but not as Daphne had before they were married.

"Peter," she said then, drawing back but still gloating on him in an adoring way.

"Simon," he said, explaining that there was some mistake.

The lady was highly delighted. She flung back her head, tossing her golden curls, and laughed down in her chest.

"Fancy you remembering that, darling," she said, patting his cheeks. "Yes, you were to be Simon, but it was a case of 'Simon called Peter' all over again. On account of your uncle. Remember? And we needn't have worried after all, because he died of a stroke just after. Remember?"

Now Simon remembered none of this, but as he liked the lady who had somehow saved his life and had made him very comfortable, he smiled in a non-committal way. People were always so nice and friendly that he liked to please them when he could.

"Peter, Peter, Peter," cried the lady, clasping her hands together and setting all her rings sparkling, "when you smile like that you don't know what you do to my heart. Oh, my boy, to have you back again! You, just as you always were! I feel as if I'm going to burst, s'help me God!"

The way she said the last words was comical and at the same time likeable. She spoke like a cheerful man. Simon saw now that the lady was wearing a low-cut blue evening gown, and as she drew a deep breath of satisfaction she puffed out like a pigeon and it did seem as if she might easily burst. Her bare arms were rosy pink. Although she was fat and far from young, despite her hoarse voice and make-up and the smell of brandy, she was oddly like a giant baby. Perhaps it was the dimples that played here and there, perhaps it was her eyes, perhaps it was her air of innocent and chubby happiness.

Simon was delighted to give his benefactress so much pleasure simply by lying at ease in a very fine bed. The mere fact that he was there was obviously quite enough.

"The hell with the stuffy old doctor," she said. "You've had all the water you need when you didn't know you were drinking it. You're well enough now, and old enough now, to join me in a little taste by way of celebration."

Now that his whole range of vision wasn't occupied by the lady, Simon saw that he was, indeed, on a boat, for he was in a cabin though it was much more luxurious than the ones he had seen when he came back from Germany. There were paintings on the wall and the curtains were of satin or something expensive and shiny. The carpet was pearl grey, and a shaded electric lamp stood on a small table by the side of his bed. Stars looked in at a window.

On the small table there was also a silver tray with fine glasses and a sparkling decanter and a jug. The lady, moving with surprising agility for all her size, poured out two stiff drinks—much bigger than a double at The Pheasant. She put one glass into his hand, and raised the other on high.

"Here's to us and our re-union after all the years, my dearest boy," she said. "Down the hatch!"

"Good health!" said Simon, and had to smile again. The lady was quite a character. He liked her.

Beer was Simon's drink, but he knew that the brandy was a drop of the genuine article—none of that South African or Australian stuff. There hadn't been much sale for brandy at The Pheasant. Even the motorists in the largest cars would have been staggered by the price they would have had to pay for this. Not a bit of bite, and yet a real kick. It went down

his throat and into his stomach, a trickle of melted gold, spreading a gentle glow, cheerful and comforting as a log fire on an autumn evening.

"Ah!" sighed the lady, smacking her lips. She was obviously one who enjoyed things and made no secret of it. A smudge of red showed on the empty glass. She gave him a knowing and friendly wink. "A bird never flew on one wing, Peter. The hell with old Sawbones if he looks down his nose."

She poured the drinks again, and that suited Simon. Such brandy as this—and on the house—was a treat and quite unique.

"To us. Bottoms up, Peter."

"To us, mum."

The lady had finished her drink almost before he could get the words out. She wasn't the kind to loiter. Her face lit up again; she shone; she doted on him.

"Mum!" she echoed. "Mum! Still my little boy though you've grown to be such a great big man. Ah, Peter, to hear you call me Mum! Darling, say it again."

Now Peter hadn't meant the word in that way at all, but only as a polite manner of address. The lady wasn't at all like Mrs. Smith. He was, however, much too kind and gentle to dream of explaining. If she liked to be called Mum that suited him, particularly as he didn't know what else to call her.

"Yes, mum," he obliged. "Those were good drinks, mum."

"Bless you, my chick!" The lady was the easiest person in the world to please. "We'd better not have another. We can't afford to take any risks now. I'll just slip away and get the Quack. Don't say anything about me giving you two."

With a conspiratorial nod, she floated away, light as a balloon.

The brandy, taken on a stomach empty for unmeasured time, had put Simon into a happy if somewhat foggy mood. He clasped his hands behind his head and mused in a detached way. This wasn't all a dream. Though the lady had gone the sumptuous cabin remained. Nothing like her or this place had ever happened, of course, in Royals Bottom or the Stalags. You wouldn't expect it to. But in the great wide world outside life probably was quite another kettle of fish. Perhaps the odd and wonderful went on all the time. He wouldn't know. Well,

it was great fun, and obviously there was nothing he could do about it. He was afloat again on a different sea, but enjoying the same rich sense of relief and escape and freedom.

No need to dig futile and laborious tunnels now; no need to fret against the chains of Royals Bottom.

The apple-faced Irishman had done him a great service. And so casually, even their meeting a matter of sheer chance, neither of them having any inkling of its amazing consequences.

Simon waited as he had in the rubber ring, not paddling, content. Daphne could keep her holiday camp and all the delights of Jersey. He was away on the tide and anything might happen.

He discovered that he was wearing pink pyjamas soft as a spider's web. That, too, was new.

The door opened and the lady re-appeared. She was more subdued now. Her joy had become solemn and sacred; her manner was that of one entering on sufferance a sickroom where a dear one lay.

"I think you'll be pleased with your patient, doctor," she said in a deferential tone. It was impossible to believe she had ever talked of Sawbones and Quacks.

She held the door open with a respectful bow.

Anybody but Simon would have started at the sight of the man who entered, but Simon was always in the happy position of expecting and accepting anything and anyone. He remained relaxed and at ease.

"Here's our nice kind Dr. John come to see Peter," the lady said soothingly.

Dr. John was very small and dark and more like a giant bat than a little man. He had a big head over which yellow, dry skin was drawn tightly, revealing all the bones of his skull. His eyes were bright and round and black, his nose a beak, his big ears pointed. His back was hunched and his head nestled between sharp shoulders which rose like the tops of wings. He wore a kind of uniform like a ship's officer, and when he moved he seemed to rustle. His feet were very tiny even for his body. Perhaps he should have flown.

Very professional and correct, he stared at Simon in silence,

as if seeking to read what went on behind those perfectly-cut features and those deep and liquid eyes.

"Yes," he said, "yes. I am pleased. You are right, Hilda. I have got him round the corner."

He spoke in a dry, precise way, curt and crisp. His beaked nose sniffed.

"Brandy?" he said, turning about sharply and frowning at the lady who was Hilda. "You have been giving him brandy without my permission."

Under his gaze Hilda, once so big and jolly and reckless, wilted and hung her head.

"Only a drop, Dr. John," she confessed.

"I know your drops, Hilda. And no doubt you had one yourself?"

"Just for company's sake, Dr. John."

Dr. John sighed and shrugged his pointed wings.

"I devote all my skill—my very life—to the task, and so it goes on."

Hilda, under this quiet but stern rebuke, collapsed still further.

"However," said Dr. John, relenting a little, "human nature is human nature, and a mother's feelings at such a moment call for allowances. Let us forget it. No harm seems to have been done."

Hilda brightened immediately, opening out again like a flower in the sun. She touched the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief she took from the front of her dress and looked as if the rebuke had been well worth while since it had been followed by this charming absolution.

"Thank you, thank you, Dr. John," she cried, clasping her hands and setting the rings a-glitter.

"Leave us now, Hilda," the doctor ordered. "I wish to make a thorough examination, and I prefer to be alone with the patient. The presence of a mother at such a time is distracting. You may order Peter a little broth and some breast of chicken."

"I shall bring it from the galley with my own hands," said Hilda. "Oh, thank you, thank you, Dr. John."

"Do not hurry. I shall be some time."

"Very well, Dr. John. Now be a good boy, Peter."

She shook a fat finger at Simon in tender chiding, and floated happily away.

Dr. John's manner changed immediately. He became much less formal, and perched briskly on the end of the bed, crossing his short legs which did not reach the ground. His eyes continued to bore at Simon, and Simon returned their gaze, for he was interested, too. He'd never met a human bat before. A minute passed in silence. The doctor showed no sign of wishing to begin any examination other than the one he was carrying out.

"Well, young man," he said at last, "you've had a narrow shave. Another hour, and it would have been curtains for you."

His voice was different too. He spoke in an easy, natural way, and seemed glad to lay aside his part as Hilda's physician.

"I thought so," said Simon.

"Sheer luck we saw you. However, that's all past—! What's your name?"

"Simon Smith."

"Simple Simon, eh?" said Dr. John, breaking into a crackling chuckle, as if he felt pleased to have thought of a new jest. His head wagged shrewdly between his shoulders. "And yet I wonder are we so simple as we look? You seem to have behaved with admirable sagacity so far. I mean in the matter of falling straight away into the role of long lost son. I'm rather surprised. If you'll excuse a medical man, you don't look particularly knowing or clever. How did you cotton on to it, especially just coming round like that?"

"She seemed to want me to be this Peter," said Simon, honestly. "And as I was grateful for all she'd done I hadn't the heart to explain or argue."

Dr. John cocked his head and considered this statement with interest. It had the ring of truth and that made it the more remarkable. Dr. John, obviously, had expected something smart or cunning or devious. He turned the truth over carefully, a bat with a strange but probably edible insect.

"I think you and I should be friends, Simon," he decided. "And I think we'll find it will pay us to be."

Simon smiled easily.

"Oh, I'm always a friendly sort of chap," he said.

"A charming trait," said Dr. John. "But here I advise you to choose your friends rather carefully. I can be a good friend aboard this yacht."

"So I'm in a yacht?" said Simon. "I didn't think they were as big as this."

"The *Stormalong* is one of the largest British yachts afloat, and I should say quite the largest in commission. Nowadays only the Countess would be so foolish and impractical—so crazy, one might justly say—as to indulge in the *Stormalong*."

"Is the lady a countess?" Simon asked, for he knew that was very high up indeed.

"Not only a countess—they are two a penny—but she is also a multi-millionairess. That is why we must watch our ps and qs. But come, first of all, please tell me all about yourself, my dear boy."

Simon's tale was plain and unvarnished. He was brief and to the point. Apart from baling out nothing important had happened to him. All the rest of the time he had been merely a prisoner of one kind or another, pacing up and down in one of his two grooves, the hamlet or the compound. Dr. John, however, did not find this uneventful history boring. He listened to every word, inserting a quick question at intervals, nodding approval.

"If one chanced to believe in Providence one would say it was providential," he said at last. "Look, my dear Simon, I am a judge of character and my fellow men. I like you. You are what you seem to be though that is almost too good to be true. I am going to trust you. I shall lay my cards on the table, and admit you may well be the ace of trumps. And trumps are hearts—a woman's heart. Leave everything to me. I am the very man to play you well."

Simon shook his head gently.

"I should prefer to play myself," he said.

"You shall, you shall," Dr. John agreed hastily. "That is all you have to do—play yourself, be yourself. I must admit I'm deeply impressed that you haven't overwhelmed me with a flood of questions. There must be much you want to know, a host of things that puzzle you."

"There are," said Simon, helping himself to water, "but

I am in no hurry. At the moment I am well looked after and most comfortable, and that is enough."

"Not quite!" said Dr. John, hunching his wings and leaning his big big head forward. "Aboard the *Stormalong*—not quite. Unless you know how you stand, though you have done very well so far, you may put your foot in it and ruin a situation which could be described as God-given if one chanced to believe in God. Therefore you must allow this friend, the good Dr. John, to put you wise."

"I shall never be wise," said Simon. "I think it is much better to be just as I am."

"I can't tell you how much I agree. That is the very thought in my head. But though you choose, so wisely, to remain simple, life is complex, particularly in the *Stormalong*. I take it you have no great objection to ceasing to be Simon Smith?"

"Being Simon Smith hasn't ever meant anything to me, one way or t'other."

"Precisely. So now you are Peter Mountford, and that is a far, far better thing."

"There certainly wasn't much future in being Simon Smith," Simon admitted frankly.

Dr. John rubbed his little claws of hands.

"My dear boy," he said, "I called you the ace of hearts. That was a misnomer. You are far too charming to be an ace. You are, I tell you truly, the knave of hearts."

Simon was amused and showed it. The human bat was so cunning and clever. It was quite a treat to watch and listen.

"Apart from wanting to please the Countess, why are you so keen that I should go on being this Peter Mountford?"

"Because then we are on velvet. While you are Peter we hold all the trumps, the hell with just aces and jacks. We are sitting pretty; we are on the up and up: we are going places."

He spoke with impish delight, raising the sharp points of his wings, and looking like one of the devils in the old carvings on the pillars of Blickington church.

"What happened to this fellow Peter?"

"It is a long and complicated story, and we haven't time for the details before your mother, Hilda, comes barging in. He was drowned at sea. That is your poor mother's tragedy. It was that—and the fact that she was always crazy as a hen

even as a young beauty—which has reduced her to her present sorry state—a state which touched my heart so much that I gave up one of the finest practices in Harley Street to minister to her alone.” He linked his little hands, as if in prayer. “There is perhaps something, my friend, in the Hippocratic oath which young doctors take with such little understanding.”

The bat looked pious, as if he lodged in a belfry.

“And I’m like this Peter?” asked Simon, when he had allowed Dr. John time enough for his prayers of self-approval. “Am I his double?”

“Heaven forbid,” said Dr. John hastily, “if one chances to believe in heaven. He was a wart, a blot, an excrescence. His going was the only good thing about him. If his mother hadn’t been mad as a March hare she would have realized that. Instead, poor dear lady, she built for herself an entirely false idol and burnt incense before it, fuddling her mind further. When the sea presented you to her on, as it were, a silver platter, you were the answer to prayer, the son she had lost, and even more so, the son she had always wanted. You are the perfect example of wish-fulfilment. Do things become clearer?”

“A little,” said Simon. “And I’m glad I didn’t spoil it for the poor soul.”

“You’re glad?” chuckled Dr. John. “You’re glad? What about me? With you in my hand I can play any game I want.”

Simon’s brow creased.

“And what game do you want to play, doctor?” he asked.

Dr. John held out his little claws in protest and looked most shocked.

“Game?” he said. “That comes of just running on, and not choosing one’s words. The only game I am trying to play is to save your poor mother from herself, and believe me that is no merry pastime, and many a man has failed where I hope to succeed. Among other things she is a dipsomaniac. That means a drunk, Simon—a real drunk. I see you and she between you have polished off the best part of a bottle of brandy. Like mother like son, eh, Peter?” He hunched over in mirth briefly, and sat up again. “I thought I could trust her by her son’s bedside. Ah, me, that is the kind of game I have to play, my dear Peter.”

Simon made no answer to this. Since he knew only what Dr. John told him there seemed to be no point in saying anything. Simon had few words and never wasted them. This wasn't wisdom on his part, but merely his nature.

Dr. John was so clever that he took alarm at silence.

"Do not misunderstand me," he begged, quite humbly. "If I hope to use you it is only in a cause which you would be first to support: the healing—or at least the comforting—of a bereaved mother's heart."

Again Simon found there was nothing to say.

Dr. John held out his hands in appeal.

"You can't look the good, simple, honest soul you are and refuse to work with me," he said.

Simon gave his physician another dose of silence.

"We'll see," he said then. "I like the lady. She's a real old sport, and I fancy I'm good for her. I can only see it my way. I don't know what your way is, because I've only your word for it. Perhaps you are quite all right. I just don't know. But I shall know as things go on."

Dr. John smiled encouragingly, but he showed sharp bright teeth and his smile froze oddly on his parchment face, so that it became a menacing grin.

"You have come out of a very simple world into one which is far from simple," he said. "In your father's inn the chalk was white and the dart score-board shiny black. Now that you voyage in the *Stormalong* you will be puzzled and bewildered often enough when you come to tot up a score and find the chalk is black and the board white, or any other colour in the rainbow. But there!—all this is beyond you; my dear Simple Simon, as I call you for the last time. Only this I do say to you: put your faith in me and do as I say, or you will find that for all the goodness of your heart you will land smack in the ditch. In the ditch and the dirt, Peter Mountford. Perhaps there won't even be time for you to get back to be Simon Smith."

His eyes were shiny beads, his chin thrust out, his nose hooked down. Just for that moment he was a very menacing bat, a vampire.

Simon looked at him in mild surprise.

A timid knock came at the door.

"There's mother now," said Simon.

The remark puzzled Dr. John anew. He was so clever that he had to wonder whether it was as innocent as it sounded, or whether it mocked him. He moved swiftly up, and called, "Come in!" When the Countess entered Dr. John was just re-arranging the sheets and blankets about Simon, having completed his examination that moment.

"Very nicely timed, my dear Hilda," he said, amiable but the doctor in charge of two patients. "I am happy to assure you that your son is out of danger. His strength has defeated the sea. All he needs now is rest, food and care. Under no circumstances is he to have any alcohol."

"Oh, doctor," said the Countess, "how can I ever thank you enough? I don't know what we should have done if you hadn't been here."

"Nor do I," confessed Dr. John candidly. He took a professional look at the tray. "Yes, Hilda," he said, "that's quite first class. I see you have a mother's skill and wisdom where your dear Peter is concerned."

The Countess swelled with pride, and Dr. John hovered in the background whilst she arranged the tray on a bed-table.

"And now," ruled Dr. John firmly, "we're going to leave the patient in peace. His digestion is out of practice. He mustn't be disturbed whilst he eats even this perfect meal, and afterwards he must rest until morning." He rustled across. "See, I'll take the tray, and then you can put the things down on the table when you've finished. I must say, Hilda, I never saw your son looking better, despite all he's been through. Now just kiss him goodnight, and we'll leave him."

Dr. John picked up the silver tray with the decanter. He did so in a way which showed that such furnishings were unfitting in the sickroom, but he spared the Countess any further rebuke. Diamonds swinging from neck and ears, she leaned over and planted a warm, moist kiss on Simon's brow. And as she did so Simon patted her bare arms with affection, not as part of Dr. John's game, whatever that might be, but merely because it seemed sad and touching to him that a woman should have diamonds and a yacht and be a countess and still crave her lost son so deeply that she was able to take a

stranger from the sea to her heart, hugging him to her like a child whose doll has gone astray to be replaced by another.

"Goodnight, my darling," said Hilda. "Sweet dreams, and be quite, quite well tomorrow."

"I shall be, mother," Simon promised, and he gave her pink arms a parting squeeze.

The blue eyes in their spiky lashes moistened with love and gratitude.

"Just take it quietly, Peter, old son," said Dr. John, seizing the opportunity to give him a quick nod of approval for his performance. "We'll probably have you up tomorrow."

"Goodnight, mother. Goodnight, Dr. John," said Simon, his open face thanking them both for all they had done, and admitting that it was another kindness to go now.

The door closed, and he gave his attention to the soup, chicken and crisp toast, and the iced water.

He did not bother his head about the Countess or Dr. John or his masquerade as a son who was dead. All was going quite smoothly and happily.

He was an honoured guest in the biggest yacht at sea. She pulsed on, powerful and luxurious, through the starry night. The dawn would bring Tomorrow. That would be full of interest also.

Life in the great world outside, now that he had reached it at last, proved most entertaining—at least to one who wasn't used to it.

CHAPTER TWO

I

Two round red faces considered Simon in surprise. One was that of the new-risen sun, which, staring straight in at the window, had discovered a villager from Royals Bottom aboard the *Stormalong*. The other belonged to a very large, bulging man, like an overstuffed bolster, who towered up by the bedside. He was in uniform with gold braid, and wore a peaked cap which he had pushed to the back of his head in order to rub his broad smooth brow. He looked bland, benign and soft—just like the jovial monk on the calendar which hung in the bar of The Pheasant. For all that at the moment he could not conceal that Simon puzzled him.

"Good morning," he said. "I'm Captain Pamphillion. Captain Pamphillion," he repeated, emphasizing his rank, and then, rubbing it in again, "I'm in command aboard the *Stormalong*. No matter what you've been told you'll do well to remember that."

He spoke in a lowered tone, as if he did not want to betray that he was in the cabin, but his voice had a boom in it like a brass gong.

"Good morning, Captain," Simon said with proper respect. He had never spoken to the captain of a boat before, and this looming man was most impressive, particularly when you were looking up at him lying on the flat of your back.

"Um," said Captain Pamphillion. "Um." He gave his brow a couple more squeezes, and then replaced his cap at a rakish angle. "You're not quite what I expected, Mr.—?"

"Smith—Simon Smith."

"—Mr. Smith. I didn't see you when you were picked up. Had a go of malaria. A pity. That let Michaelis get you into his clutches."

"Michaelis?"

"I suppose you know him as 'Dr. John.' Doctor—bah!"

"Isn't he one?"

"Michealis is many things—a rogue, a scoundrel, a menace—but I take leave to doubt whether he's a doctor. You seem a decent young fellow. I couldn't do you any better service than to warn you against him. Steer clear of dear Dr. John. Shun him as you would the devil he so rightly resembles."

The subdued boom died away, and he stood wagging his head and pursing his lips. Simon gave him his open smile which could mean anything.

"It was he, of course, who put you up to this preposterous trick," the Captain said. "Already he's landed you in trouble. I could have you in irons—in irons, Mr. Smith—as a wicked impostor. How did he manage to get you in his talons so quickly?"

"He didn't manage anything," said Simon. "It happened."

"Bah," said the captain, "things like that don't just happen."

"Oh, yes, they do," said Simon, because they did.

He explained to Captain Pamphillion who listened, hands thrust into pockets, teetering from heel to toe to the slight motion of the yacht.

"Remarkable—most remarkable," he conceded, accepting Simon's story without question, which was natural enough for Simon, as usual, had plainly told the plain truth. "But how quick Michealis was to get in on it—quick as the rat he is. Yes, he stole a march on me there whilst I lay in the grip of malaria. Still, I'm his match, and I'll see to it that he doesn't make you his monkey. You and I together will be a strong team. I am, as you see, just a typical plain bluff seafarer." He paused for Simon to agree, but as Simon had no real idea of what a seafarer of that description should look like, he merely smiled again. "There's no hanky-panky about me, no dirty tricks. I talk straight, and act straight. I'll tell you what I'll do, Simon—you don't mind me calling you Simon, I hope—?"

"Everybody does," said Simon.

"Good. The name suits you somehow. This is what I'll do: I'll put all my cards on the table."

"Everybody does," said Simon again. "Even here on the *Stormalong*."

The captain's prominent pale eyes considered this.

"What were his cards?" he asked.

"I think you know them better than I do," said Simon.

"Possibly. I fancy you're not as simple as you look, Simon."

"I don't know how simple I look," said Simon, "but I don't pretend to be clever."

"You can keep a still tongue in your head. You wouldn't tell me about that rogue's cards. You evaded it neatly. Here are some of mine. Michealis is the evil genius of the *Stormalong*. I see you have a sincere regard for the Countess. That again shows you are no fool. What a woman she would be if we could free her from Michealis! It is he who keeps her tippling and supplies her with drugs—it is he who pretending to heal continues to disturb her mentally. If your doctor keeps on hinting that you are insane—and if you have blind faith in him—in time you will become insane. He gains complete mastery; your true friends are shut out and powerless to aid. That is the awful position in which the luckless Countess has been placed. Michealis hopes to use you in some deep way to increase his hold. We must see he doesn't. You are a trump card."

"The knave of hearts?" asked Simon.

Captain Pamphillion burst into a hearty sailor's laugh.

"By Gad," he said, "that's about it. Very neat! What put that idea into your head?"

"Dr. John," said Simon.

"Um," said Captain Pamphillion, and his laugh went away. He hated the thought of Michealis having got in first again. "Well, here's another trump you can play whenever there's need," he resumed.

"I'm not very good at cards," said Simon.

"Then it's about time to learn. We hold one card which will always put our enemy in his place. If you want to see him flinch just ask: What happened to the Count?"

"Who is the Count?"

"Count de Savroni. Poor Hilda's third husband."

"And what did happen to him?"

"He died—mysteriously—at sea aboard the *Stormalong*. For further information you must apply to dear Dr. John. He

knows the answer to that one, and he knows I know he knows. A pretty position, eh?"

Simon smiled agreement.

"I—" Captain Pamphillion began, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the door open. The corner of his eye had been watching the door all the time. "I'm delighted," he resumed bluffly, "to find you so little the worse for wear."

Dr. John had entered briskly, but not quite briskly enough. His mouth was stretched in a genial grin.

"Ah, Peter," he said, rubbing his little hands in satisfaction, "I see you've already met our gallant Captain Pam. You're astir early, Captain, and looking bright as a daisy. I gather the fever broke after I left you last night, and now you are restored?"

"Thanks to you, Dr. John," said Captain Pamphillion, beaming down on the bat with gratitude and affection.

"Between friends no thanks are needed," said Dr. John, hunching his shoulders and chuckling dryly. "Well, what do you think of this other patient? Isn't he a fine son for our poor Hilda?"

"A very fine son indeed," said Captain Pamphillion. "I must admit that this new treatment of yours, Dr. John, is most dramatic and original."

"Anything that can bring happiness to the Countess might be called a Christian act, if one chanced to believe in Christianity. And now if you'll excuse us, Captain, I'll just give this young man a final overhaul."

"With pleasure," said Captain Pamphillion cheerfully. "As a matter of fact I merely looked in to see if I could help to rig out our friend. My pyjamas seem to fit very well. I have flannels and a sports shirt which should serve for the moment. The laundry shrunk them a little. I'll send Wilson along. When you're bathed and dressed, Simon—er, that is, Peter—come up and I'll show you round the *Stormalong* before breakfast. A fine craft."

"Worthy of her captain," said Dr. John with a bow.

"And her surgeon," said the seafarer not to be out-done.

As Dr. John turned to his patient Captain Pamphillion gave Simon the benediction of his smile—the wide and honest smile of a sailor, a smile which bound them in comradeship.

Dr. John was in no hurry to start the overhaul. He perched again on the end of the bed, and the morning light twinkled brightly on his tiny, pointed shoes.

"That upended barrage balloon!" he scoffed. "I'll bet he's been trying to cause trouble again."

"Trouble?" Simon repeated vaguely, the word having no meaning for him.

"If I could only persuade Hilda to sack him and engage a real captain the *Stormalong* would be the happiest ship on the seas. I doubt if he's even got a master's ticket. He's the root of all evil, and one of the people I warned you against. Don't in your simplicity, Peter, ever imagine he is any man's friend but his own. What has he been telling you?"

"The usual things," said Simon.

"I don't doubt it," said Dr. John. "But you and I are a match for twenty such as that gasbag. If you want to prick him and see him collapse there is just one question you need to put to him."

"What question is that?"

"Just ask him," said Dr. John, pausing briefly to bend fondly over a rustling chuckle, "just ask him—What happened to the Count?"

"The Count?"

"Poor Hilda's third husband. He was murdered aboard this yacht a month ago. I know the murderer, and the murderer knows I know. He'd not stop at murder to get me out of the way for that reason. A nice set-up, eh, Peter?"

Simon's smile endorsed that view. There was a lot to smile at in the big world. A most amusing place. It had been worth waiting for.

"You can get up now and take a bath if you can face water again," said Dr. John. "You're as fit as a flea."

"Thanks to you, Dr. John," said Simon, having learnt that was the proper response.

"Yes, thanks to me," said Dr. John, rubbing his claws in congratulation. "And don't forget you are the knave of hearts."

"The jack of hearts sounds better," said Simon, throwing back the clothes.

Dr. John gave him another of his sharp glances.

"Perhaps it does," he said, "especially aboard the *Stormalong* where there are knaves a-plenty for honest jacks like you and me, Peter, to take because we're always trumps. Come, that's not so dusty, Peter, my boy?"

II

When Simon climbed the little brass-tipped ladder and stepped out on deck into the brightness of the morning it just so happened that Captain Pamphillion had paused at that very spot at that very moment. He swung about, surprised and pleased by the fortunate chance, and gripping Simon's arms surveyed him with pride.

"First rate," he approved. "They fit you better than I dared to hope. Even the sandals—excellent! Your mother will be delighted and that is all to the good." Satisfied that Simon was alone his boom hushed, and he asked, "What did the rat have to say after I left?"

"That I was fit as a flea," Simon reported.

The wider wide world into which he had stepped was an even more beautiful place. The sun shone from a cloudless dome, and the ocean was smooth and shiny as silk. The yacht chugged along, sending out a widening V of ripples. Brass sparkled and paint shone. A low rail ran round the spotless deck, and down at the round end a sheet of canvas was stretched from side to side. In its shade were cane chairs and a table.

Simon decided, even before his eyes could take in anything else, that the *Stormalong* was the loveliest toy.

She reminded him of the mechanical boat his mother had given him once upon a time—one of the very few possessions he had ever really valued. You wound her up with a key which fitted into her funnel, and her name, *Fearless*, was printed in gold at the front. She had been Made in Japan—that was printed on her, too—and she could go right across the pond at Royals Bottom. His father, who was always a poor judge of such things, had sold the *Fearless* to a man in a motor car whose little boy had taken a fancy to her when he saw her sailing so proudly among the ducks.

The *Stormalong* sailed among ducks, though they were white gulls with red beaks who sat very neatly on the water and bobbed and dipped on the ripples she made. Like the *Fearless* she had a short yellow funnel and two low masts, but, of course, she was a million times the size and the pond she sailed was blue instead of yellow. Nevertheless, she gave Simon exactly the same feeling as the *Fearless*. Despite Dr. John's opinion he didn't think the Countess was at all crazy to spend her millions in this way. Money couldn't have bought anything better.

Away to the left ran a low wall of land. He didn't ask its name for he wasn't interested. To the right nothing but the ocean which stretched so far that after all the *Stormalong* seemed just as little as the *Fearless*.

"Yachting weather—what we sailors call real yachting weather," said Captain Pamphillion. "I see you are pleased and impressed."

"I am," said Simon.

"You lucky fellow to be the son of the owner," said the Captain cheerily, and added, "that is, of course, whilst you and I stand united. At any moment, my dear Peter, I can dispossess you."

"Of course," Simon agreed readily, "but why should you?"

"You're a delight, Peter. You have an instinct for doing and saying the right thing. I hope you never lose it."

"I hope so, too," said Simon.

Captain Pamphillion's pale eyes turned sharply on him, as if these two replies had awakened doubt again. But Simon was merely looking enchanted with the scene and the yacht and everything.

They went round the ship together. In front of the funnel was a glass house with a wooden roof. In it a sailor lounged lazily turning the spokes of a wheel. He was dressed in a proper white suit like a little boy in his best. His hair was red and he had freckles. Simon, remembering that he might have saved him from the sea, smiled at him, and the sailor gave him a quick, sly answering grin, as if he and Simon, being young and nobodys, could afford to be friends under the mighty Captain's nose, particularly as it was turned away at the moment.

Simon didn't ask the sailor's name or refer to him at all. He and the sailor would know each other presently.

Another sailor—a broad, bronzed man with tattooed arms—was washing the clean deck with a mop. He worked easily, quietly, and gave Simon a nod.

Being a sailor on a yacht struck Simon as a very good job.

Everything in the yacht had different names. The room where the crew lived up in the sharp end was called the fo'c'sle—even the dining-room was called the saloon, as if it were a bar. There was no hurry to learn all these terms. Simon was content to admire. He was impressed with the engine room. It was like being beneath the bonnet of a huge car with the motor running. All he saw under the *Stormalong*'s deck pleased and delighted him. If the *Fearless* had had an inside apart from clockwork she would have been exactly the same.

Captain Pamphillion paused before another white door.

"Your mother's suite, Peter," he said, "and a fitting home." He placed a large smooth hand across his mouth and whispered, "I'll bet he's in there with her, and up to some of his wicked work at that. Probably giving her a shot of cocaine so that she'll be bright for breakfast. Think of it, Peter—cocaine before breakfast."

He rolled his eyes up to heaven at such iniquity.

"I don't like to," Simon admitted.

At that moment the door opened and Dr. John popped out, closing it very firmly behind him.

"A medical man's day starts early," he said. "Your mother will meet us at breakfast in a few moments. I'm glad to say she is very bright this morning. Having you aboard is doing her a great deal of good."

"Or is it a shot of cocaine?" asked Simon, who was interested in the point.

Dr. John darted a glance of black hatred at Captain Pamphillion who took care not to notice it and looked serene, the master of a ship showing her off to an interested land-lubber.

"Cocaine?" gasped Dr. John, horrified. "What put such a foul idea into your head, Peter? Your mother would rather cut off her right hand than touch drugs of any kind. I should

cut off both my hands rather than administer them." He held out his claws, offering them to the sacrifice. "Between ourselves, I sometimes wish she found it a little easier to take aspirin."

"I never have to take things like that myself," said Simon. They did not pursue the subject.

"Come, Peter," said Captain Pamphillion urbanely, "we have just time to look round aft before breakfast is served."

"I'll come with you," Dr. John offered.

"Don't bother, Dr. John. Please don't put yourself out."

"I think I'd better, Captain Pam. There's a certain person we should discuss with Peter before he meets her."

Dr. John, peeping up at his friend, gave him a wink and a nod.

"Um, yes," Captain Pamphillion admitted rather unhappily. Clearly he had overlooked this person and did not appreciate Dr. John getting in again before him.

"Let's step into my cabin for a moment," the doctor suggested, opening a door.

The place was like Simon's but more austere. Large and learned-looking books were ranged on shelves. There was a cupboard in the corner labelled "Medicine Chest." Beside it was a small wall-cabinet, marked "Poison," which was padlocked. Dr. John closed the door. He was a careful man about doors.

"Now, Peter," he said, "Captain Pam and I are going to take you into our confidence on a rather delicate matter. I—"

"Perhaps as master this comes into my sphere, Dr. John," said the Captain, trying to recover lost ground.

Dr. John shrugged high shoulders.

"I accept that willingly," he said. "Though I was ready to do my duty it suits me very well for you to take over the task of saying what must be said about a most charming young lady."

The Captain gave his friend a most unfriendly glance.

"Peter," he said, "this is just between ourselves. We both feel—particularly Dr. John here—that you should be put on your guard. You are young and little versed in the ways of a

wicked world. You might quite easily be deceived by appearances."

"Quite easily," said Simon.

"Things aren't always what they seem, not by the hell of a long chalk," said Dr. John, stepping out of his professional manner.

"At breakfast you will meet Miss Rose—"

"She stinks," said Dr. John, and chuckled.

Captain Pamphillion cleared his throat on a note of disapproval. He preferred to keep the moment serious.

"Miss Rose—Mary Jane Rose—is your mother's companion. She had been with her only a few months, but she has already succeeded in establishing a certain hold on the poor lady. I don't deny she may mean no harm. It is our duty, however, as the two best friends the Countess has in the world, to keep an eye on this—um—this interloper. We say nothing against Mary Jane, of course—not a breath, not a word—but there are certain things—well, you know what I mean—?"

"No," said Simon.

"I have already, alas!" said Dr. John, "had to warn you of your mother's unfortunate mental state."

Captain Pamphillion very adroitly contrived to catch Simon's eye and recall to him his own warning about the purpose of such warnings.

"In a case like this," said Dr. John, who, though he dwelt below them missed nothing, "the medical adviser is the only person competent to judge. I feel that in the circumstances it is highly undesirable that another person, particularly one placed in a more favoured position by reason of being of the same sex, should attain too great a degree of ascendancy over one whose mind is not all it should be. Who are we—in such matters mere simple men—to judge just what is afoot? If you want my opinion, however, Mary Jane is as cunning as a carload of monkeys and she's up to no good. She's had the inside running, and she's got to be bumped out of it. I did not say bumped off, mark you, Simon. That would be carrying things to a fantastic degree. Quite fantastic. All we are trying to do is to set you on your guard. Repose no confidence and no confidences in Mary Jane."

"In this Dr. John and I, as ever, are one," said the Captain smoothly.

"If you were of a more worldly type, my dear Peter, we would not bother to say anything. You would see for yourself."

"What kind of a card is she?" asked Simon, who had listened with attention.

"A card?" they asked.

"I was thinking," said Simon, "that she sounded like the queen of hearts."

The two staunch friends were thrown slightly off balance by this innocent and natural remark. They studied Simon sharply but he was smiling happily over his little quip.

The faint boom of a gong, on the same note as that in the Captain's voice, put an end to the brief and thoughtful pause.

"Ah," said Captain Pamphillion with gusto, "breakfast! I've a good appetite. What about you, Peter?"

"I'm hungry as a hunter," said Simon.

"That's what I like to hear," said his doctor. "Come along then. What are we waiting for?"

In the camaraderie of healthy, hungry men the meeting adjourned to the saloon, welcomed by the breath of frizzling bacon which smelt particularly good on a sunny morning out on the bright blue sea.

Wilson bowed his greetings. He was silver-haired and venerable. The Captain told Simon that he had spent all his life as a steward in yachts. He looked a very wise man. Cutlery and glass sparkled, and slices of melon awaited them. So did Mary Jane Rose, but not the Countess de Savroni.

"Miss Rose," boomed the Captain, "may I introduce our owner's son, Peter Mountford. We have been telling him how much his mother owes to you."

"How d'you do?" said Mary Jane and Simon, each studying the other with the interest the occasion warranted.

As Simon had not bothered to wonder what Mary Jane would be like he was not surprised to find her a pleasant-faced young woman in horn-rimmed glasses who looked rather like a school teacher. She was quietly dressed, and her hair was mousy. She had the poise of one who worked for her living in other people's homes. Her eyes were grey and her smile reserved. Dr. John and Captain Pamphillion had been well

advised to put Simon on guard. To a simple eye there was nothing sinister about Mary Jane.

Dr. John, however, shot her a look of sharp inquiry.

"Where's the Countess, Mary Jane?" he asked. "She was as bright as a lark when I left her."

"She always is, Dr. John," Mary Jane acknowledged quietly. "But she's changed her mind. She does, you know. She decided to breakfast in the suite. I fancy she feels that she would like to meet Mr. Mountford—dressed and in the light of day—just by herself instead of at the breakfast table under all our eyes."

"Um," said Captain Pamphillion, turning this over.

"I see," said Dr. John in the same way.

They were a very vigilant pair.

The idea seemed sound to Simon. If his mother were barmy she also appeared to be very sensible. A first real meeting in public might have been a bit awkward. Again Simon decided that the Countess was a good old hand, and if she wanted a son was entitled to have one.

The melon had spice on it. Simon had never eaten melon at breakfast before, and had never tasted one as sweet and juicy as this. Life in a yacht was fine. Through all his days he had eaten food which was same-ish or worse.

"Did you lock the tantalus, Mary Jane?" asked Dr. John.

Mary took a small silver key from the pocket of her dress and showed it.

"Not that it's any use, doctor," she added. "The Countess can always pick the lock with a hairpin. She's very clever with hairpins."

Dr. John briefly beat his large skull with his little claws to express the exasperating problems which confronted a conscientious medical man in such a difficult case.

"I must have the lock changed," he announced.

"Yes, indeed," boomed Captain Pamphillion. "For the Countess doesn't even need a hairpin. I tried the tantalus myself in a moment of idle curiosity. The lock is broken. Surely you both knew that?"

Captain Pamphillion had scored. He shared his moment of triumph with Simon. Hadn't he said that Dr. John encouraged the Countess to tipple? This world was certainly

complex. Now Mary Jane and Dr. John were allies, and the Captain the enemy.

"I certainly didn't know," the girl said.

"And its news to me," said Dr. John. "I do feel you might have mentioned the point, Captain Pam."

"Do you?" the Captain said. "I didn't like to butt in. I thought it was probably another of your methods of treatment which I don't pretend to understand."

Wilson, tactfully, served eggs and bacon which covered the pause. Simon lost interest in everything except his plate and his cup. He had never enjoyed food better, and the coffee was very unlike that made from a bottle at The Pheasant or brewed from acorns.

When next he listened the talk was about some book which they'd all been reading. Simon wasn't one for books. The toast with real butter and marmalade was much more to his taste.

"Ah!" he said at the end of the meal, which was about his only contribution to the conversation.

His silence had passed unnoticed. Nobody had bothered much about the owner's son, though Wilson served him with just the appropriate shade of extra deference.

Mary Jane returned to her duties, and Dr. John seized the opportunity to go with her. His face showed concern. All the money in the world could not have hired a more zealous medical adviser.

The door closed. Wilson had left the saloon for the moment. Captain Pamphillion, having made sure that they were alone, leaned across the table, put up a large, pink hand, and nodding sagaciously, whispered to Simon.

"That was clever of the rat in his cabin," he said. "It was a smart piece of double-crossing for him to pretend to warn you against her. Yes, he's shrewd. If you want a sailor's honest opinion, Peter, those two are as thick as thieves, they're hand in glove. You and I must watch that pair, Peter, if they're not going to make a killing."

Simon smiled and nodded, ready to agree to anything, full of excellent food, content and goodwill to men and the wide world.

III

"Spain!" said the Countess, waving a diamonded hand at the distant land. "To think that your poor, dear father bought me a castle in Spain before you were born. It looked swell, but it wasn't. Earth closets, and as damp as a well."

They sat together in the stern in comfortable basket chairs under the awning. The sun, riding high, flooded the vast sweep of sea and sky with golden light which wasn't kind to the Countess. She wore wide canvas trousers, a blue cummerbund and a golden blouse which laced up the front, the white, round laces straining. The breeze of the yacht's progress stirred the bunched curls. Her make-up was more enthusiastic than discreet. It was as though she looked out from behind a mask. Obviously with or without Dr. John's approval she had strengthened herself with brandy. Her eyes were very bright and shining, though veined. Cocaine before breakfast?

Though aware of all this Simon wasn't critical. He liked his mother. She needed no entertainment and her joy in his company was flattering. People usually liked him but, apart from his other mother in that other life, no one had ever really loved him. And the Countess made him feel that she did just that.

"Eyes!" she ejaculated so suddenly and in such a fierce unhuman growl that any listener might have been forgiven a start. "Eyes! Always watching! Eyes!"

She gripped his arm so hard that her crimson nails dented the skin.

Simon hadn't started. He remained his calm self.

"That's so, mother. Lots of eyes."

He said it in a matter-of-fact way. He, too, had been aware that though they were supposed to be alone and in privacy they had plenty of company. All the time they were under scrutiny, and the mere fact that it was meant to be unnoticed made it the more glaring. If it wasn't Dr. John it was Captain Pamphillion or Mary Jane or a sailor, or a seagull. Everyone was curious; everyone wondered whatever they could be saying, those two down there. It was like being freaks in a tent at a fair.

The Countess's grip relaxed. She lit another of her special

cigarettes. They were rolled in rose-pink paper, gold-tipped and scented. She used a long green holder. Simon preferred the Goldflakes with which he had been liberally supplied.

"Gazelles have beautiful eyes," she said. "Very like yours, Peter darling. I am fond of gazelles."

Hilda was apt to wander off like that. She seldom kept to one topic for any time, though she often returned to it after wide digressions. Simon did not mind. People were entitled to talk about whatever they liked so far as he was concerned. He listened now to a long and vague zoological dissertation—which rambled over a large section of the animal kingdom—with the same gentle and considerate attention he would have given to anything else. One corner of his mind attended to this, whilst the rest of his being was happily concerned with the joy of the day, of wandering about the earth like this, untyed, free as the gypsies. He had always envied the gypsies when they straggled through Royals Bottom. He had often planned to run away with them. They were people with the right ideas. But never the brightest caravan as beautiful and snug and fascinating as the *Stormalong*.

"Buttons," the Countess was saying all at once, though how she had got round to them he didn't know. "When my dear mother—your grandma, Peter—took me to England as such a lovely young girl of seventeen she fancied I would land at least a duke. I was the belle of the year I came out, Peter—and it was a famous year for beauties. But no dukes for me, darling. It was your father, or no one. I said so and stuck to it. And he, of course, made buttons. My mother—your grandma, Peter—used to say, I remember, 'That Pearly King!' Trying to mock him. But it was no good. He might make buttons, but he made millions out of them, too. Everybody has to have buttons, don't they, my lamb? Not that I married your father for his money. Why, I was just a child—a crazy child. Everyone said I was as mad as a rabbit. I wonder why we say that? Rabbits seem to me to lead very sensible and happy lives."

"You're right," Simon agreed, and for a while they talked about rabbits.

"Mind you," said the Countess, "there was more than buttons to your daddy. He was the cleverest speculator ever. He only had to touch a thing, and it turned to gold. And his

brother—the uncle you were called for, dear—he was just the same, though he was cotton. And dying like that of a stroke, poor dear, and leaving everything to your daddy, who was to follow him just a few years later. No wonder they took all that time to find out how much your father had left."

"How much did he leave?" asked Simon as a matter of interest.

"Oh, dear," said the Countess, passing her hand across her eyes, "I've simply no head for figures—never had. I heard quite a number of times, but I've completely forgotten. I know that in spite of all those awful duties and taxes and governments and things that it's more now than it was then. One of these days you'll come into a mountain of money, Peter, but that won't make you wish your old mother into her grave, will it, my duckie?"

"Good lord, no, mother!" Simon cried, for once raising his voice, horrified at the idea.

The Countess patted his hand.

"I know! I know!" she soothed. "You're as good as gold—it's written all over you—and better than all the gold in the world. But there are others, Peter."

"What others, mother?"

"Don't trouble your dear head," she said, shaking her curls. "Hilda will take a lot of killing. There's life in this old dog yet. My God, I could use a drink."

As if the millionairess aboard her own yacht had only to breathe a wish and have it granted, Captain Pamphillion came along the deck in a manner at once dignified and jolly. He was followed by Wilson bearing a silver tray.

"It struck me, Hilda, that this memorable occasion was definitely one on which the main-brace should be spliced."

He dropped his voice. "Particularly as dear Dr. John is taking a nap after his recent exertions."

He gave a sea-dog's deep laugh, and Hilda chuckled with him.

"Is he really asleep?"

"Dead to the world."

"Wilson," said the Countess with commendable promptitude, "put those on the table and bring six more."

"Yes, m'lady," said Wilson, grave as a bishop.

"Champagne cocktails are rather pansy," the Countess explained to Simon, "but here's to us, Peter. No heel-taps."

She had drained her glass before they could do more than raise theirs. Simon found the drink tickly and stingy, but he didn't dislike it. The cherry was nice. He wondered vaguely why Captain Pamphillion had seized the first opportunity to let his mother enjoy a drink, seeing the charges he had made against Dr. John. But there was no use worrying about questions which had no answers.

"I've stripped myself as good as naked for Peter," the Captain was saying in bluff fun, but determined not to have the loan overlooked. "He's equipped from head to foot by your humble servant."

"And very nicely, too," said Hilda. "You're a darling, Captain Pam. I don't know where we should be without you."

"Piled up on that rocky coast like as not," the Captain said in high spirits.

Wilson returned with the drinks. It almost looked as if he had been expecting the repeat order and had it ready mixed.

"No sense in wasting time," said Hilda, keeping a watchful eye open. "Down the hatch." She swallowed her two drinks and one of Simon's at a speed which quite impressed him. He'd seen customers spend a whole evening at The Pheasant over a half-pint or a stout.

"Thank you very much, Captain Pam," she said, settling back in her chair. "A brilliant idea. I'd never have thought of it myself. And now will you be a pet and go and ask Wilson to come back and clear away the evidence before . . . you know . . ." She gave him a large wink.

Captain Pamphillion didn't appreciate this at all. He was eaten up with curiosity to know what Hilda and her son were talking about; he felt if he could only stay he would pick up many useful points. He couldn't. He managed to maintain the good-humour of a sailor and bounced away, a trifle too buoyantly.

"Such a dear gallant fellow," said the Countess, cheered by her cocktails, "and yet sometimes he looks to me like one of those large white grubs that crawl out of rotten trees."

"He does," said Simon.

"But I really shouldn't say such things," she laughed. "It's

most ungrateful. I must be crazy as a hen. Not that I think hens are crazy. They have a lovely time—looked after, eating, laying eggs and making love to the rooster."

The talk, for a while, drifted off to the farmyard. The peasant in Simon enjoyed that, too. Surprisingly, the Countess had a wide and frank knowledge of farmyard ways.

Wilson solemnly removed the evidence.

"He would make a perfect butler on the stage," said the Countess. "I should never have married Nigel. The actor, I mean. Of course, you never met him, did you, darling? I keep forgetting how long you've been away. He was very lovely to look at, and had quite a lot of charm when he turned it on, but it was really worth all I paid him to let him divorce me on the grounds of mental cruelty. He was only after my money. I should have seen that. But there!—I've always been foolish. A lot of money is an awful handicap. Think how happy the Eskimos are."

Simon didn't know much about the Eskimos, so his interest didn't abate whilst his mother told him of those fortunate people who lived on blubber in houses made of ice.

"It sounds all right," he said.

"They have no money and are happy, whilst I have too much and am sad. I wish I could give it all to you, but then your life would be in danger."

"Is yours, mother?" asked Simon, dismayed.

"Oh, yes," the Countess said, nodding so emphatically that all her curls danced. "But then, if it comes to that, so is everybody's. I remember when Nigel was appearing in a play about a circus there were a young couple who did a trapeze act. They risked their life every night and matinees, for practically nothing a week."

Simon, though the least inquisitive of men, would have liked to question his mother further about why, and in what way, she imagined her life to be in danger. It couldn't be done. A man much more adept with words would have been baffled by the Countess. She was talking now, as if it were the only bond in common between them, about circuses, small and great, English, American and Continental. She used a lot of words which Simon didn't begin to understand. And presently

the point he had wished to raise had been washed away by the meandering brook.

Dr. John came mincing along, his little feet in their shiny shoes treading the deck as if it were a ballroom floor.

"Hilda, my dear," he cried, hands clasped, "forgive me. I dozed off. I have been under a strain. You must come and rest until lunch-time. Charming and all as this young man, your son, is, he mustn't be allowed to overtax your strength."

"I do feel a bit tired, Dr. John," said the Countess, wilting suddenly. "You're so kind and good. Do you think I could have just a little stimulant?"

Dr. John's manner conveyed that, even against one's judgment, there were moments when a patient had to be humoured.

"Just this once, dear Hilda, you may," he said. "A really nice one, if you'll only be a good girl and come along straight away."

"You see how kind they are?" asked the Countess. "Good-bye for now, my lambkin."

Simon was surprised to see that she did not walk in her usual way, but shuffled like Jo Hayrick, the village idiot of Royals Bottom.

It seemed that Dr. John was right. The long talk had been too great a strain. The small doctor held her elbow solicitously.

IV

Fine to watch the porpoises. They enjoyed the freedom of the seas as much as he did, they revelled in it. Playing about the yacht, shooting to the surface, curving down again into the blue depths, romping away only to romp back, they seemed most fortunate and carefree creatures.

"Hullo," said Mary Jane, appearing at his side.

"Hullo," said Simon.

She looked very prim and proper in her neat white dress with little grey collar and cuffs.

"I must have a talk with you," she said. "I was going to leave it till tonight, but in the dark people can creep up on

you. It's really more private in broad daylight—if such a thing as privacy exists in the *Stormalong*. The trouble is I don't know where to begin."

"Why not, miss?" asked Simon. She was very like a young teacher.

"My name's Mary Jane," she said, "and you may as well use it, for I'm going to call you Peter."

Simon nodded. Everybody called him that now, just as they used to call him Simon in the old days.

Mary Jane looked up, considering him.

"You're such a mystery."

"There's nothing mysterious about me," said Simon.

"There's lots. I can't make out which one of them got you into this, or how they managed to arrange for you to be floating there in the middle of the sea."

"No one arranged it. It just happened."

"But," she insisted, "people don't go sailing about the ocean in a car tyre."

"I did."

"You mean you weren't planted there as part of some plot?"

"Not me."

"It seemed so fishy," she said. "I wish I knew the truth."

Always willing to oblige Simon told it to her.

"I suppose it could happen," she said, convinced by his candour. "Are you a gypsy, Peter?"

"No," Simon said. "I come from Royals Bottom in Herts. We keep the pub there."

"Oh, I wish I could believe you were as simple and sincere as you sound!"

"Why can't you?"

"I suppose it's this horrid yacht. Everyone suspects everyone else, and we're all plotting and scheming."

"Why are you?" asked Simon.

"Because we're human and therefore vultures and wolves at heart," said Mary Jane with a bitterness surprising in a young woman who looked like a teacher. "Because the lovely smell of wealth and big, easy money has made us all hungry and wicked. Because a silly old multi-millionairess waiting to be plucked of millions is too much of a temptation in a hard and wicked world."

"Who are 'we'?"

"Each one of us—that Captain, Dr. John, you—"

"Not me," said Simon.

"Then why are you posing as her son when you're nothing of the sort?"

"Because she wants me to be her son."

"You mean it was her idea?—she put you up to it?"

Simon made a mild gesture of protest.

"No one put me up to anything. I keep on explaining that to all of you."

Mary Jane, frowning, turned this over.

"I don't get it," she said.

"Neither do I," said Simon.

"If only I could trust you—!"

"You can."

"You make me feel I can, but I've got so used to being surrounded by plotters and cheats and enemies that I feel I'm getting a bit unbalanced myself. I . . . Who is your favourite film star, then, Peter?"

Perhaps his morning with the Countess had accustomed Simon to the vagaries of conversation aboard the *Stormalong*, or it may have been his habit of accepting everything as it came, but Simon showed no surprise at this sudden switch which was, perhaps, just as well, for the Captain had joined them, moving silently on his rubber soles.

His big face was shadowed momentarily, as if he were not particularly interested in their topic.

"Don't you young people of to-day ever talk about anything but the pictures?" he boomed.

"Very seldom," smiled Mary Jane.

"Well, it's good to see you getting better acquainted. I've often thought at your age, Mary Jane, it must be very dull to be afloat with a lot of old codgers."

"I wouldn't call it dull, Captain," she answered, her grey eyes twinkling behind her glasses. "In fact it's quite exciting—I mean being at sea in this little yacht and all that kind of thing. But getting back to what we were saying, who's your screen sweetheart, Captain?"

Captain Pamphillion beamed indulgently.

"Why, Myrna Loy, I suppose."

"I thought as much!" said Mary Jane. "I always find—"

She ran on merrily about the pictures until Captain Pamphillion decided he had a job of work to do and must leave the youngsters to their movies.

"You see what I meant about the dangers of the dark?" said Mary Jane as soon as he was well out of earshot. "He'd have sneaked up on us without me spotting him and probably heard just what he shouldn't. Take my advice, Peter—look over your shoulder and all around you before you say anything aboard the *Stormalong*. The lot of us will grow eyes in the back of our heads before long. We could do with them. But as I was saying, I want to trust you, Peter, and I believe I can. I think I'll lay my cards on the table. You see, I'm no better than the rest of them. The bug has bitten me—and bitten deep."

"What bug?"

"The gold-bug."

"Whose game are you playing?" asked Simon. "Dr. John's?"

"My own."

"I see."

"And my game is to get the Countess off this yacht. Until I do that—until I can get her away from darling Captain Pam and Dr. John—I'm all held up. I don't know exactly where you fit in. I don't know what you're up to."

"I am up to nothing," said Simon. "Why do you want to get her off the yacht? I like it better here than anywhere I've ever been. It's fine being on the *Stormalong*."

"That's what you think, you simpleton, but I have the best of reasons for wanting to get her away. When I've thrown off those two, then she'll be my property." She paused and shook her head, pondering another angle of the problem. "But now that you've butted in it's not so simple. Say what you like, you're *X*, the unknown quantity. Still, I don't think you'd be greedy, or at least not as bad as that pair. Look at it from my way, Peter. I'm the sixth daughter of a parson who was known as a saint in the East End. I, of course, honour that good man's memory, but I'm convinced that saints shouldn't marry and beget children. When he died, worn-out with good deeds, we were left penniless. I'd just managed to matriculate. Since then I've had all kinds of jobs from junior teacher to a

waitress, with a few years in the Wrens in between. It hasn't been bad fun, but I'm ambitious and life has made me hard as nails. Heaven may protect the working girl, but heaven's very busy and there are an awful lot of working girls. I can make my very uncertain future safe and secure—I can become an heiress which is quite a good idea for a girl who wears glasses—if only I play my cards right in this business."

"I see," said Simon. "So you are playing cards, too?"

"How do you mean?"

"It seems to be a very popular game in the *Stormalong*."

Mary Jane's plain if pleasant face was grim as she nodded. "You're right," she said. "And now you turn up unexpectedly, like a joker nobody knew was in the pack. Is it honest to goodness that nobody did know?"

"Nobody."

"You do muddle everything," Mary Jane complained. "Though of course I could get rid of you easily enough," she discovered.

"How?" asked Simon.

"She believes in me and trusts me, and so she should compared with those others. If I put it into her head that you were only a pawn in one of their plots—that you were no more her son than Adam—your reign would be brief."

"That would be cruel to her," said Simon.

"I know! I know!" Mary Jane admitted with feeling. "I like the poor daft old creature. I don't want to hurt her. All I want is some of the wealth she can spare so easily. She doesn't even know how much she's got. She could make me safe for life and never miss it. She will, if I can wangle things. But I must get her off this yacht. Here's another reason: they're not as considerate as I am. If for some devilish trick it suited their book, they'd murder her to-morrow."

"Why should they do that?"

"I don't say they will, for it might be killing the goose that lays pretty golden eggs as things are. I only say they would if it suited them. Don't forget what happened to the Count."

"Oh, yes," said Simon, remembering, "what did happen to the Count?"

"He was murdered one dark night. Pushed overboard, I .

fancy. You can do a murder in a yacht more easily than you can get a taxi on a wet night ashore."

"I suppose so," said Simon, looking at the great wide plain of the sea. The porpoises had gone away.

"Aren't you surprised to hear that?" asked Mary Jane in some disappointment.

"No," said Simon.

"You're the strangest man," she said, baffled, trying to read what went on behind his classic features. She couldn't, of course, because nothing went on there, or nothing of the sort she was looking for. "Aren't you shocked, horrified, to realize the Count was murdered?"

"No," said Simon. "He's only a name to me. I don't even know what he looked like. He isn't someone real."

Mary Jane clasped her hands and looked out rapt into the depths of the sky.

"Not real!—isn't that strange!" she marvelled. "The loveliest man who ever lived—not real! Oh, I know he was a rotter and a cad and all kinds of things, but to me he remained the very loveliest man. Not real!" She turned quickly about and faced Simon, looking up at him with shining eyes. "I loved the Count," she said defiantly, waiting for Simon to start at this declaration.

"Did you?" Simon said, interested to hear that but starting not at all.

"I did! I did!" she insisted, stamping her foot. "Even girls who wear glasses can fall in love. And he loved me. If he had lived, everything would have been different."

"Was he murdered because he loved you?"

"No," said Mary Jane with utter conviction. "Not a soul had any idea. He was murdered because whilst she had a husband alive neither Captain Pam nor Dr. John could get ahead with their schemes. He stood in the way. He had to go. Oh, God, one of them saw to it that he went."

She burst out laughing suddenly.

"Oh, Peter," she cried, "you are a perfect chump really! Do you mean to say you've never heard of Honegger?"

"Not that I remember," said Simon.

"Music, it seems, is not one of your interests then, my dear Peter?" asked Dr. John, grinning his crooked smile, looking

up at each of them with eyes which bored like gimlets.

"No," said Simon. "Not music. We really only had the wireless on for the news at The Pheasant."

"Your candour is always a delight, dear boy," chirped Dr. John. "With your nature, Mary Jane, you must find it most attractive. I hope you're not setting your cap at the owner's son?"

"Oh, Dr. John," cried Mary Jane, blushing quite prettily, "you are a tease! You know very well I'm a spinster to the marrow."

V

Peace and beauty had gone from the world. Great, tattered clouds came up over the horizon and went rushing through the dying twilight as if they had to reach that land over there in a tremendous hurry. A lighthouse burned to welcome them. Sometimes it was a blaze of dazzling white, and then, as though the rising wind had blown it out, it dimmed and wasn't there. A moment later it was back again, proud and mighty. The sea was no longer a wide plain. It tumbled and churned into hills, which swept along in the same direction as the wind, eager to hurl themselves against the dim wall of the land. The water splayed out whitely in great roaring masses. The *Stormalong*, instead of chugging evenly, rose and dipped and swayed. Blickington Fair had never had such a swing-boat as this.

Simon stood enthralled. So this was a storm at sea? He hadn't expected it to be so wild and wet, so full of noise, so violent. Now, indeed, the *Fearless* seemed big and safe, whilst the *Stormalong* had become tiny and tossed and lost. The marvel was that the ocean didn't swallow her up.

The wind howled louder, the sea leapt higher, the clouds hurried faster, and the yacht danced more wildly.

A hand fell heavily on his shoulder, just as he was lurching forward. He crashed headlong on the deck, his hands smacking against the low rail. Had he been a foot nearer the side he would have gone over into the raging waves whose tops were flecked with white now. The *Stormalong* would have bounced

and staggered on, and only one person would ever have known.

Captain Pamphillion, all concern and remorse, helped him to his feet.

"Gad, Peter," he boomed, "what a fool I am! I'd forgotten you hadn't your sea-legs. I slapped you on the back to congratulate you on being such a good sailor. That was a near thing. Peter, I can't begin to tell you—!"

Captain Pamphillion took out a large handkerchief and mopped his face. The handkerchief fluttered like a white flag.

Simon had been trained to fall, and he was little the worse, though a trifle jarred. The thought of where he might have been at this moment wasn't pleasant. Captain Pamphillion's apologies and explanations sounded sincere enough for anything. He had put his handkerchief away and gripped Simon by the arms. In the last of the light his face looked like a moon.

"Peter, old boy!" he said.

"What happened to the Count?" Simon asked, because that question suddenly came to his lips.

Captain Pamphillion gripped him more strongly. His hold was steadyng, but was also one which meant that a sharp push would send Simon backwards.

"I told you to ask Dr. John that," said Captain Pamphillion, his moon face advancing. "Why do you ask me?"

"Because I know now what did happen to him."

Captain Pamphillion laughed cheerily.

"My dear boy," he said, "there's no dispute about how the Count died. The only question is who sent him over. If I knew that I would be the happiest man alive. I should purge this ship of a killer at the earliest possible moment, and sleep much sounder at night. If you think I had anything to do with it you're even simpler than I take you to be. The Count found me this berth: the Count and I were as thick as thieves. If he hadn't been murdered I should have been sitting pretty. You surely don't think—?"

"I think I'm going to be sick," said Simon.

He was, but his experienced and concerned friend just had time to swing him about and face him down wind. The paroxysm passed.

"I don't like being seasick," said Simon.

"Come, I'll get you down to your bunk," said the sailor. "Anyway, Peter, you shouldn't be on deck in this kind of weather and in the dark. Why anything might happen—simply anything. A false step in a craft this size on such a night! No, Peter, you'll be much better off below. It's a good thing I chanced along when I did."

He put a steady arm about Simon and steered him along the crazy deck and down to his cabin. The cabin wasn't the place it had been. It had gone mad, too, but the Captain saw to it that Simon undressed and got to bed, and he rang for Wilson to bring what was necessary.

"The poor young gentleman," said Wilson. "Evidently a bad sailor."

"He's lucky to be alive," boomed Captain Pamphillion. "I don't know why he is. Nearly went into the drink."

"Dear me!" said the steward.

"But for me he'd have been over, and what would the owner have said if she'd lost her son like that?"

"Oh, dear, sir, I hate to think."

"Look after him, steward. I must get up on topside."

"Yes, sir."

Simon felt better for what had happened. His bed was warm and snug; he was no longer in a cold sweat. So long as his eyes were closed he didn't mind so much.

"Do people die of seasickness?" he asked.

"Bless you, no, sir. Never! Not when they're fit and well like you, sir. I've seen a lot of seasickness in my time. Personally, I'm a great believer—once the worst is up and you're safe abed—in something to take your mind off things."

"What could do that?" asked Simon.

Although he couldn't risk opening his eyes he knew that Wilson had taken a hasty look about the cabin, and when the steward spoke his voice was low and secretive.

"I could talk to you, sir."

"Thank you," said Simon out of mere politeness because he couldn't imagine anything that could be said to him just then would take his mind off how he felt.

"Very good, sir," said Wilson. "I noticed you talking to Mary Jane this afternoon, sir. Please don't bother to answer

me. I know it's an effort, sir. Just lie quiet, and listen. I know you found her most entertaining. She is a most entertaining girl in her own quiet, sensible way. And clever, too—even brilliant at her own job. Of course, she's had the right training. No money spared. A brilliant masseuse. Holds highest diplomas. A clinic in Harley Street wanted her, but she preferred to travel. The wanderlust is in her blood, sir, if you know what I mean. That is why she consented to join her ladyship. And what a help she's been to her! I don't want to enter into details, but we talk, as it were, within the family circle. I mean, kneading her ladyship's liver. Her ladyship puts a great strain on that organ. Mary Jane's trained fingers work miracles, sir. I sometimes doubt whether her ladyship would still be with us if it wasn't for Mary Jane. Come, I think I shall lay my cards on the table with you, sir. You are her ladyship's son, Mr. Peter, and even beyond that you are palpably honest and trustworthy. If I may say so without disrespect—still talking, of course, as a family retainer, Mr. Peter, sir—those qualities are lacking from some of those aboard the *Stormalong*. I need say no more on that point. No doubt your talk this afternoon helped to open your eyes. Among her many other qualities, Mary Jane is no fool. I said I should lay my cards on the table, sir, and I do so. Mary Jane is my daughter." He paused and breathed apologetically. "If I bore you, just move your head the slightest bit and I shall understand."

Simon's head remained so still on the pillow that it might have been held in cement.

"Excellent!" said Wilson, in a gratified tone. "I hoped to hold your interest. Yes, sir, my only and dearly loved daughter. For a man in my position I have lavished a fortune on her, and I feel she has repaid me as few fathers are repaid. It is strange that I should tell you this on such short acquaintance, sir, but I can only say it is a tribute to your personality and obvious integrity. Nobody else, not even her ladyship, has any inkling, and I must implore you not to mention so much as a breath to anyone, and least of all to my daughter. She is dutiful and loving, but she would never forgive me. I must ask you, on your word of honour—though you needn't speak it aloud and distress yourself—that you will respect my confidence no matter what happens."

He paused, allowing Simon time to register a silent vow.

"You may well wonder, sir, why I have divulged this secret. The answer is simple, and, I venture to think, not dishonourable. I am a father. I saw you two young people there this afternoon, and it struck me at once that you were getting on very well together. You are, if I may say so, Mr. Peter, a singularly attractive young man. You have charm and beauty and strength and great wealth. I value my daughter, sir, and her happiness. I wouldn't have her suffer by reason of a mere shipboard romance with one who, even in these strange and upside down days, is above her. Excuse me if I speak in an old-world and yet perhaps blunt fashion. But with me my daughter comes first."

Wilson's cure for seasickness had worked like a charm. Simon in listening to this had forgotten the motion of the ship and his racked inside. He opened his dark eyes and gazed at Wilson with a very natural interest.

"So it was you," he said, "who murdered the Count?"

The steward was startled out of his episcopal dignity. He had been standing, it seemed, feet neatly together, experienced body swaying steadily as a pendulum, hands linked, head slightly inclined. Simon's remark put an end to all that. He straightened up as if he had been struck ; he swayed back; he flung up his arms on high. His shadow swung crazily about the white cabin.

"I? Mr. Peter, sir, you're not merely seasick, sir, you're—but no, let it pass. You didn't know the Count. He was a prince amongst men, and if he were with us to-day this would be a very different yacht. The kindest man, the most generous. In a rather effusive phrase, I worshipped the ground he walked on. If I may be so bold as to ask, what earthly reason should I have for doing him any harm?"

"Mary Jane," said Simon.

"Mary Jane! He was a man of fifty, he treated her like a distant but kindly uncle, he had no eyes for anybody but her ladyship. Believe me, Mr. Peter, a steward of my experience knows a lot more than anyone guesses. Had there been any funny business I shouldn't have missed it. If there had been, I grant you, I might have taken action. If the circumstances warranted, Mr. Peter, I'll go as far as to say I would not have

stopped at murder. But I was the last man on earth to have any motive for killing the Count. I'll admit to you, Mr. Peter—still within the family circle—that on the night he died I was in tears."

His hands fell to his side, he stood shaking his head a little in humble and respectful reproach.

"Indeed, loyalty to his memory and a desire to serve his widow to the best of my ability is another factor which prompted me to make my revelation. Mr. Peter, sir, again I speak frankly. Mary Jane is up to something, and even I, her father, can't find out just what. Like many of her generation she has a will of her own and likes to take her own way. I admire her for doing so, and at the same time a father's heart is uneasy. It occurs to me that, with your great capacity for winning the confidence of others, you may easily learn from her things I do not know. I should appreciate it, sir, Mr. Peter, as her father, if you would keep me posted on what she is up to. Needless to say, I don't expect you to act as a spy or informer, but if you could pass on anything which might enlighten me I should be deeply grateful as a father, Mr. Peter, sir, and your mother's loyal servant. Do you think you could do that, sir?"

Simon's eyes had been open too long. The swaying cabin, the swaying steward, the swaying shadow had done their work.

"The thing again, quick," he said. "I'm going to be sick." Wilson started into action.

"Ah," he said, "I warned you. It's an awful pity, Mr. Peter, that you didn't just listen."

The upheaval was violent.

When Simon had recovered he opened his eyes again, and saw that Dr. John had joined Wilson.

"Ah, the faithful steward!" said Dr. John, who held a glass in his hand. "Come, Peter, here's something from the cupboard in my cabin. This will fix you up."

Simon saw the word Poison written on a padlocked door, but he had gone beyond caring.

"Did you fix something up for the Count?" he asked wearily, out of his muddled thoughts.

Dr. John laughed and Wilson allowed himself a smile.

"If we knew who fixed up the Count we'd know something

very useful, eh, Wilson?" he said.

"Yes, sir," said the steward with a little bow.

"This, my dear boy," Dr. John proceeded, "is merely a little draught of my own which works wonders for sufferers such as you. It soothes the tortured stomach and the jangled nerves and the racked brain. You've seen it work wonders, haven't you, Wilson?"

"Indeed, yes, sir," said the steward.

"Have no fears, Peter," said Dr. John with friendly irony. "You have Wilson here as an impartial witness."

Simon took the glass and gulped down its contents. The taste wasn't bad. He closed his eyes and relaxed. When he ventured a peep a little later he was alone and the cabin was in darkness which was a relief though he still seemed to see all the inanimate things endowed with frantic life.

The miseries of seasickness had disturbed even Simon's calm acceptance. The great wide world into which he had escaped seemed for the first time a troubled and troubling place. He was like a cage-bird which finds itself out in a storm, harassed and lost. He thought with longing of Royals Bottom and the firm, dry land, and the hills which stood still and quiet. Nobody had any money there, except the people up at Chingley Hall perhaps. The only games they played in Royals Bottom were darts and dominoes for the price of a drink. He sighed and turned on his side. Perhaps, after all, there were worse ways of occupying the time than a game of darts with Miss Enid.

VI

"A charming girl," the Countess remarked fondly, gazing after Mary Jane as she paced demurely down the deck. "Quite one of the most selfless people I have ever met, and, I'm glad to say, devoted to me. It's lucky she's a girl of character determined to earn her own living. She has no need to, of course, for she comes, you know, of a wealthy family. Her father is a big distiller. We get our stocks for the *Stormalong* direct from him, I fancy. He was a great friend of the Count's. That's how she chanced to come to me."

This third change of fathers might well have evoked comment from some, but Simon let it pass. After all, Mary Jane and Wilson had both spoken to him in confidence and because they trusted him. Also his mother was hardly the person to straighten matters out. Much kinder, and wiser, to let her think and say whatever she wished. It was quite probable that she had muddled Mary Jane up with some other companion. She often got lost in time and among people.

"It was one of the few good things Bingo did for me."

"Bingo?"

"The Count. He had a lot of very grand names, but everybody called him Bingo."

The *Stormalong* had rounded a long point of land on which rose a lighthouse and square white buildings. There was shore on either hand, and ahead crouched the Rock of Gibraltar, like a grey lion. Mary Jane had explained that over to the right was Africa, and that they were entering the Mediterranean. This information had pleased and interested Simon, and he smiled as he watched the bright scene unfold, like a picture in technicolour at the Regal in Blickington. He had never expected to see such famous, romantic places when he started out in his rubber tube. The miseries of seasickness lay far astern. The wide world had become a very good place again, so much so that, looking at the villages on the shore, it struck him that they were probably prisons very like Royals Bottom, though they looked so foreign and pretty.

The Countess and he sat under the awning in the stern. A light breeze blew and big white clouds sailed the clear sky. Before them stretched the immaculate deck of the yacht, and a haze of heat drifted from the stubby funnel. On the top of each of the masts perched a gull. The flag at the stern fluttered and rustled.

"What was the Count like?" asked Simon idly. The point was of no importance, but the Countess enjoyed talking and almost any remark served to keep her bubbling on.

"Bingo," his mother said, "was a great disappointment in many ways—in fact in every way. I suppose I should have expected that. I met him at the Casino in Cannes. He wasn't much older than you, Peter dear, though he seemed to be because he had much more experience of the world. He was

very handsome, too, but not as you are, my dear boy. He was the sleek and willowy type and most sophisticated. Quite the best dancer I've ever known, but dancing is not enough to make a happy marriage, as I hope you'll remember, darling, when the time comes for you to find some nice girl and settle down."

Simon didn't mention that he had already found a girl, even if Daphne wasn't a nice one. He felt his mother would have been distressed to think of him taking such an important step without consulting her. Also Daphne seemed much more dead than the Count, who at least lived on in people's thoughts and talk, whereas Daphne had gone completely. If it came to that Simon was drowned at sea so far as she was concerned.

The Countess had darted a very cunning glance about. For once and for a moment they were not under observation. She whipped from her trouser pocket a small silver flask and put it to her lips. There were glug-glug sounds and her dimples danced. She was very like a large pink baby enjoying an overdue bottle.

"Ah!" she sighed, happily, slipping the flask back. "My medicine, you know, dear boy. Doctor's orders."

"Does he make you drink, mother?" asked Simon.

"They all do, by trying to make it forbidden fruit." she said. "They want me to be a dipso. Keeps me happy and easy to handle. Of course, they're all wasting time and trouble. I'd have a drink whether they wanted me to or not. I pay for it, don't I? And it's my inside. Bingo worked harder than anybody to make me knock the stuff back. What a tick that man was, and what an old fool I was to marry him. Just a gigolo and out for my money. But he seemed so helpful and reliable and useful. So he was until he'd landed his wealthy bride, and then it was quite another story. He thought he owned me, and so owned the earth. He hadn't a penny himself. It's surprising that having made such a success of it when I first married I should have been such an idiot ever since. I suppose I was lucky in picking your dear father, and after that I didn't have any luck but just trusted to sense—and, of course, I've got very little sense. Really wealthy women never have. It seems to me you can't have millions and be anything but daft."

Simon did not bother with any polite denials. His mother

didn't want them. He was surprised to find her keeping to one theme for so long, but the thought had no sooner crossed his mind than she had branched off.

A flying-boat roaring overhead caused her to forget the Count and indulge in a long lecture on the discomforts of air travel. With his natural tact Simon did not mention that he knew something of flying. So far as his mother was concerned, that night he had been saved from the sea his life had been resumed again after a blank interval. She flew far, wide and expensively, but, as so often happened, when she finally made a landing she was back where she had left off.

"You can imagine, duck," she said, "how fortunate I am to have got rid of him without all the bother and fuss of a divorce."

"What happened to the Count?" asked Simon, though nobody had suggested that he should put that pertinent question to his mother.

The Countess patted his arm in apology.

"I keep forgetting how much happened whilst you were away," she said. "I killed the Count."

"Did you, mother?" said Simon with his usual gentle interest in all she said.

"I did—and a good job, too."

"Because of Mary Jane?"

"No," said the Countess, "though the way he behaved with her would have been grounds enough almost. As soon as he saw how fond I was of her, and how much I relied on her, he couldn't be a big enough pig to poor Mary Jane. Swore she was up to dirty work—said she was my enemy and his. Jealousy, of course. He hated everyone who was near to me and dear to me. Said they were all out after my money and trying to get holds of various kinds on me." She laughed her deep, man's laugh. "The pot calling the kettles black with a vengeance," she scoffed.

Dr. John was pointing out something ashore to Mary Jane and nobody else had an eye on the stern at that moment.

"Down the hatch!" said the Countess and drained her flask. "Ah!" she sighed.

Though the death of the Count had not concerned Simon a great deal among all the joys of yachting he was mildly pleased to have found out what had happened to that shadowy man.

You couldn't really work up any strong feeling about a fellow who was sometimes young and sometimes fifty, who loved and hated the same girl, who was adorable and detestable. He changed so often that he remained vague, like a figure in a dream.

"Yes, much better out of the way," said the Countess, lighting a pink cigarette.

"So you pushed him overboard?"

The sausage curls wagged violently.

"Oh, no," she said, "nothing like that. If I'd tried to do anything of the kind I should have been the one to go overboard, and quick as winking. He fully intended to murder me, of course, but he was such a coward that he kept waiting and waiting for the perfect chance so that there would be no danger of him being hanged. All the dough in the world isn't much use if you have to swing for it. And, of course, surrounded by watchful friends as I am in the *Stormalong* he was up against something. In the end he missed the bus—or rather the boat." She had a good laugh at that.

Simon could easily have changed the subject but his mother seemed quite happy talking about the Count, and, as usual, out of his deep gratitude and affection he humoured her.

"How did you kill the Count, then, mother?"

"It all started through his manners which had once been so fine but had become positively beastly. We had one of our tiffs down in my suite. He called me nasty names—I remember he said I was a drunken old cow, which wasn't at all nice. I threw a glass of champagne at him, and he broke a leg off one of my lovely Chippendale chairs, and, as if that wasn't bad enough, started beating me with it. I called him a dirty dago lout and spat in his face. Mary Jane came in at that moment, and he saw this wasn't the perfect chance to murder me. He was mad with rage, simply mad. He didn't know what he was doing. He'd never had the brains of a louse, but I'd driven him stark, staring. I'm proud to admit it. He rushed on deck beside himself—you've never seen a dago like that in a real rage, darling—and flung himself over the side to spite me, as he thought. And that shows how insane he was, for he couldn't have done me a better service."

"I see," said Simon, loyally accepting this version of what

had happened to the Count. Simple and unversed as he was, however, it didn't appear to him that it was the truth. The Count did not sound at all the kind to commit suicide, least of all because his wife had spat in his face. Still, so long as he was dead it didn't really matter, and, if his fairy godmother of a mother wished to think it was her doing, Simon was the last person alive to be so brutal as to take away such a source of satisfaction.

A big mailboat passed close by. Her great hull with its rows of portholes, and her towering white decks, dwarfed the *Stormalong* so that she seemed no bigger than one of the life-boats on the liner. To Simon she looked like a whole town which had put to sea. There were more people in that ship than in Royals Bottom and Blickington and all the villages round about. They lined the rails, pointing down at the yacht, and their faces were so clear that he could see the envy written on them. Simon had come to take the *Stormalong* for granted, as was his way. But the excitement she caused now awoke fresh fondness and gratitude in his heart. If his mother cared to claim she had been responsible for the deaths of twenty Counts it was all right with him. To be the son of the owner of this wonderful toy which could arouse excitement even in famous people accustomed to travelling the wide world—that was something.

They didn't own their boat either. They were just passengers, as if they were in a motor-coach. Their ship would run to a timetable, like a train. She wasn't their own bright and wonderful caravan, their wandering home.

"Mother," he said, "I'm the luckiest chap alive."

The Countess gloated on him, round doll's eyes adoring.

"What a good thing I got rid of the Count," she rejoiced. "You mean everything to me. How he would have hated you! Why, your life wouldn't have been safe. A dago rat like that would have sent you overboard and never given it a second thought."

"I don't doubt it," said Simon.

Certainly someone had done him a good turn in that matter, though it hadn't occurred to him before.

"There's no fool like an old fool," mused the Countess. "What do you think of marriage, Peter?"

"I don't think of it at all now," answered Simon truthfully.

"How wise, dear boy! There's ages yet for you. But I haven't ages. I have to keep steaming. And though I should know better I like being married. A woman needs a man who belongs to her and to belong to. I've just had a proposal of marriage, Peter—last night to be exact."

"Have you?" said Simon.

"Many people mightn't think so, but to me it seems to have its points. He's goodlooking but older than me, and really I've had enough of these fascinating youngsters. They never seem to turn out as one hopes. He's solid and reliable and kindly, and he would be very useful to me. If I married such a good, sober man, who really loves me, it would save me making a fool of myself again. But, of course now, Peter, I'm in rather a different situation. There's you to think of. He would be your stepfather."

"Why, yes," said Simon. It was hard to realize that.

"What do you think, darling?"

"I don't know," said Simon, "because I don't know who it is."

"I am a goose," laughed the Countess, "but I should have thought you would have guessed from my description."

"The Captain?"

"Dear me, no, not that old windbag. No, no, Peter—dear Wilson."

"The steward?"

"Yes, my dear, but so much more than that. The safest, the most reliable, the most worthy of men. He's been with me for years. Since the day I bought the *Stormalong*. I don't know what ages ago. He's been a father to us all. To Mary Jane, to me, to everyone. So benign and wise, so imperturbable. The night I killed the Count he was sweetness itself. There'd be nothing flighty and foolish about such a match. It would be sane and sensible."

"I see," said Simon. He liked Wilson well enough, but he didn't like this idea at all. Wilson, like everybody else aboard, was a mystery. He claimed to be Mary Jane's father, and yet it seemed he wasn't; he had laid his cards on the table, but, as

was always the way, they didn't fit in. Surely he, like all the rest of them, was playing a game with millions at stake.

"What do you advise, dear son?"

"Honestly, mother, I don't know. It doesn't seem a very good idea, but I'm ignorant about such things. Why don't you ask somebody else?"

"Oh, I have," said the Countess. "After the other messes I can't be too careful. I've consulted Mary Jane and Dr. John and Captain Pam. They're all against it—most emphatically."

"Perhaps they're right," said Simon.

"If you agree with them, I'll think again. After all, you are my first consideration. I shall tell dear Wilson that you won't give your approval."

Once upon a time Simon would have nodded, but the atmosphere of the *Stormalong* was working just a little even on him. Wilson was very kind when one was seasick, but Simon didn't want him as an enemy. If Wilson wanted to marry the Countess he couldn't have done so with the Count in the way, and where was the Count now?

"I think it might be kinder not to bring me into it, mother," he said. "Wilson mightn't like to feel you'd talked over such a private matter with anyone else."

"Dear Peter," said the Countess, "you're so considerate and tender-hearted."

VII

The luminous clock on the wall showed half-past-two. Simon was surprised to find himself awake and restless. Usually when his head touched the pillow that was the last he knew until morning.

On a sudden impulse he climbed out of bed, and, without bothering to put on the slippers Captain Pamphillion had been happy to lend him, clad only in the Captain's pyjamas, he went down the passage and climbed the stairs. Behind closed doors the others rested. There was nobody about to lay cards on the table; nobody to watch him and wonder what he was up to. Peace reigned. The *Stormalong* pulsed with her own life. She

wasn't like a house on land which slept when its people slept. She was still busy about her business of sailing the seas.

Stepping out on deck he found a million stars, infinitely brighter and more numerous than those which used to look down on Royals Bottom. The night was black as velvet, the air soft and warm. Far away another ship sailed, a brief band of light. For the rest only the waters breathing quietly, unseen save where the *Stormalong* sliced them into gleaming foam. The deck beneath his bare feet was damply cool with dew. Serenity stole through him as it had that night when he set out by courtesy of the apple-faced Irishman. Folding his arms, he leaned against the mast and thought of nothing at all.

It was a good time.

Presently he strolled down to the stern and considered the spun white ribbon of the wake; then he strolled forward. A glow in the glass wheelhouse halted him. The red-headed, freckled-faced young sailor stood at the wheel, his head and chest and arms painted with pale gold from the binnacle. His hands on the spokes turned the brown wheel slowly this way and that.

Simon stepped in.

"Hullo," he said, lowering his voice because of the great quiet.

"Hullo," said the sailor, his tone revealing that he was glad of a caller.

"Got a cigarette? I've left mine below."

"Sure," said the sailor, and produced a packet and matches.

They lit up, and the sailor moved the wheel getting the *Stormalong* back on her course, the compass swinging slightly in its bright box as he did so.

"Is it hard to steer her?"

"Easy as falling off a log." He lounged back, using only one hand, showing how easy it was. "On a night like this it's money for jam."

"What's your name?" Simon asked.

"Spike—Spike Shaw. I'm from East Ham. You're a country fellow, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Simon.

"Thought so. Written all over you. What's your name?"

"Peter."

Spike gave a little snort. "I don't mean that phoney one," he said. "I didn't come down in the last shower. You're no more Peter Who's-this than I am." His voice was sharp and Cockney, a knowing voice. "There's enough lies in this craft without you telling them to me in the middle watch. What was you in?"

"R.A.F. I only did one mission and was a p.o.w. rest of the time."

"Stiff luck," Spike said. "Them Jerrys. I was in mine-sweepers. Bit different from this, I promise you."

"I'll bet," said Simon. "I'm Simon Smith."

"That's more like it," Spike approved. "Simon, eh? Well, Simon, you've met a few piemen going to this fair. What do you make of 'em all?"

"I don't know."

"Can't blame you. The *Stormalong*'s a kind of floating looney-bin, if you ask me. But for the fact I got m'head screwed on right I'd have been crackers myself by now. 'Course it's easier for me, being just a hand, but I keep my eyes skinned and see most of the goings on. I don't envy you with all that gang aft. I wouldn't swop with you. Me, I'll take the simple life in the fo'c'sle."

"I like a simple life, too."

"You won't get it with that lot."

"I suppose not," said Simon. "All the same I'm enjoying myself."

Spike nodded.

"I shouldn't wonder," he said. "I reckon under your dopey ways you're a bit of a kind of a philosopher, same as I am but different. You take things as they come."

"I do."

"Best way. Must have had some shocks all the same. I've had many a good laugh at the thought of you mooning about, innocent as a lamb, among that pack of wolvies. And proper wolves they are at that. Except that it serves her right because she's got too much dough, I'm sorry for the Countess. Poor old trout!—she attracts crooks like a jam-jar draws wasps. But what can you expect? She asks for it. Always has, always will, I figure. If it wasn't this lot it'd be others. There's something to be said for having nothing, like you and me,

Simon. But then, I s'pose you figure you're in the money now?"

"No," said Simon.

Spike studied him in the faint light of binnacle and stars.

"Blimey, you don't either," he said, surprised. "I should have thought seeing as how you're supposed to be the owner's son—"

"But I'm not," said Simon.

Spike jerked his head in renewed approval.

"You're no fool," he said, "though you look it. You figure all this is like fairy gold, as they say, and might vanish into thin air any moment?"

"Yes," said Simon, "I suppose I do, though really I don't figure anything at all."

"Crikey," said Spike admiringly. "I reckon that's being a real philosopher. You must get a lot of fun out of life."

"I am now," said Simon.

"What were you before you joined up? A tinker?"

"We keep a pub."

Spike smacked his lips.

"Nice work if you can get it," he said. "That'd do me. But what a hope! I'll never settle down respectable. I like knocking about and seeing life. The hell with being a bird in a gilded cage—even if it is a pub."

"That's so," said Simon.

"And yet for some this yacht's a gilded cage," Spike remembered. "The Countess, for instance. And she shares it with a fine lot of hawks, as I say. Are you going to get off with Mary Jane?"

"No."

"I think you're a mug. Those girls with glasses who look as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths are generally pretty hot numbers. If you ask me she's as bad as the rest of 'em. I wouldn't mind laying odds that she brings home the bacon in the end, while the others are all busy cutting each other's throats. 'Course, if they had any sense, they'd get together and work together. There's enough for everyone, and over. But they can say what they like, there ain't no honour among thieves. The cops would never pinch anyone if there was. Not one of 'em dare trust the other as far as they could kick

him. Or her. Yes, there's that. There's safety in numbers for the poor old trout. That's what used to make the Count as mad as ten hornets."

"What happened to the Count?" asked Simon, though, again, no one had ever suggested he should put the question to Spike.

"I killed him," said Spike.

He stepped to the door and flung his cigarette end out. It sailed up against the stars, a little red point, and vanished.

"Oh, so you killed him?" said Simon in his quiet way.

"That's right," said Spike returning to the wheel. "Didn't intend to, of course, but there you are. He wasn't any loss. A proper blot he was—a twerp."

"How did you come to kill him?"

"By accident in a way. He came in here rather like you tonight. It was the middle watch, too. Hell, he was slimy. Thought because he was the owner's husband the boy deck-hand was an easy mark. I wasn't having any."

"Any what?" asked Simon.

Spike grunted in astonishment and peered into Simon's face.

"Lumme!" he remarked, awed and shocked by the innocence he found there. "Skip it!" he said. "I didn't like him in here when I was on duty. I gave him a sock on the jaw which was really only a push to get rid of the pest. It was as black as the inside of a black dog, blowing half a gale and pouring buckets. He went out backwards on his ear. I didn't bother to see what happened to him. The wheel was keeping me busy. So long as I was rid of the little swine that was okay by me. 'Course I didn't know I'd knocked him into the drink. Doubt if we could have done anything anyway on a night like that. And when he was found missing next morning, 'course I kept my trap shut. Imagine the fuss there'd have been! And I certainly wasn't going to get myself locked up and perhaps hung for a little pimp like that. Not likely, Simon. Why, I'd done everybody a good turn. Especially the Countess. I always figured he'd do her in some time. So he was much better out of the way. I ought to have got a reward or a medal or something."

"So that's what happened to the Count?" said Simon.

"So far as I know," Spike said. "'Course, he may not have gone over then. Somebody else may have got him later on. They were all gunning for him, and he was gunning for everybody. They're such a suspicious bunch that each of them thought the other had done it. Every one of them had good reasons. They never thought of me. I was only the deckhand. Why should I have been so obliging as to get him out of the way for them? And it's never worried me any. I seen lots of better men go when I was in the mine-sweepers."

"I suppose so," said Simon. He was a slow smoker, but now he threw his butt into the sea.

Spike produced the cigarettes again.

"I wonder what they're up to in Marseilles?" he asked.

"Is that where we're going?"

"Didn't you know?"

Simon shook his head. "I didn't ask. One place is as good as another to me."

"There you are," said Spike. "Just like I said—a philosopher. I don't know what's doing, but I'd bet a quid there's some monkey business ahead. Always is. You can count on that aboard the *Stormalong*. Not such a bad old night, eh?."

"Not half," said Simon.

They smoked in companionable silence, enjoying the night. Simon approved of Spike. He seemed a sensible chap.

VIII

The chef, a red and tubby man, served breakfast in his white suit.

He hadn't anything like the adept ease of Wilson, but nobody noticed that. The news that the steward had disappeared in the night had caused very natural sorrow and consternation. Wilson had been a first-class man at his job. An Admirable Crichton, Dr. John declared. Nobody knew how he had gone or when or why—or at least nobody had any information to offer. He wasn't there any more—that was all. A cloud of suspicion, fear and uneasiness hung over the table. Long and thoughtful silences followed bursts of surmise and conjecture; eyes looked sideways, wondering, probing.

The Countess kept to her suite. Doubtless she was upset. Only the previous night poor Wilson had sought her hand in marriage, and now he had followed the Count.

"She must feel, dear lady," said Dr. John, "that she is in very truth a *femme fatale*."

During the morning he and Captain Pamphillion and Mary Jane by the exercise of great cunning and ingenuity, made opportunities for brief and secret words with Simon.

"As a man of the world, Simon," said Dr. John, "I feel it my duty to point the moral of this sad business. Because he proposed to your mother Wilson was murdered. Once having done murder, a criminal doesn't hesitate to do it again. I needn't say whom I suspect and whom I hope to bring to justice. This means that we must work more closely together than ever, Peter. If you hear or see anything in the nature of a clue, or discover anything even slightly suspicious, come to me at once. I know I can trust you."

"Yes, you can trust me," said Simon, who was, indeed, most trustworthy.

"My dear boy," said Captain Pamphillion, his boom more muted than ever, "as two honest, straightforward chaps with no hanky-panky, we must stand side by side. We are dealing with a criminal lunatic. You and I must be better friends than ever."

Being of such a friendly nature Simon readily agreed to this.

"Oh, Peter," said Mary Jane. "That poor old man. He'd spent all his life at sea. He couldn't just have fallen overboard. He was murdered. Of course because he proposed to the Countess. They weren't going to have that. I'll admit it wouldn't have suited my book either, but I draw the line at killing in cold blood. Watch your step, Peter, and string along with me. If someone decides you're a spanner in the works you'll be missing, too."

"I suppose so," said Simon. Many people would have felt it a good opportunity to ask whether Wilson had been Mary Jane's father in order to offer seemly condolences. Simon, however, was not as other people. He did not pry into what concerned only a dead man and a young woman who had happened to travel in the same yacht.

Spike, passing him later on the deck, said out of the corner of his mouth, "Not me this time. Wilson was as crooked as a corkscrew, but he saw we got good grub."

The Countess remained in seclusion.

CHAPTER THREE

I

MARSEILLES struck Simon as a very foreign place, and as most of his glimpses of the world outside had been gained at the Regal, Blickington, he experienced again that sense of having stepped into a technicolour film. It was at the Regal too that, not being anything of a reader, he had met the Count of Monte Cristo, who was a very different type of Count from his mother's. The feeling that one was living in a film had been heightened by seeing the island fortress from which the hero had escaped, looking almost as real and sinister as it had on the screen.

The *Stormalong* had come to rest tied up to a concrete dock. The shadows of buildings were very black, and the sunlight very white. Foreigners lounged about, many wearing dusty-looking blue overalls and others bright football jerseys with stripes. Caps with shiny peaks were favoured. Skins were dark, ranging from sun-tanned to ebony. Nearly everybody had black, shiny hair. There was a great deal of chatter, and much talking with hands. The cars went very recklessly on the wrong side of the road with high pippings of horns. The trams were jammed, with people hanging on the outside. The posters were different, advertising things he had never heard of, often just a single word in tall letters which meant nothing. Two cats sat in the sun. They were different from cats in Royals Bottom—leaner and longer with sharp narrow faces. The horses were different in some way, and the waggons they hauled were different. A policeman waving his little white baton in the road was different: he looked like a soldier.

On a high hill rose a big white church. It had a tall statue of a lady on the top of its dome, and was very different from the church at Blickington, let alone the chapel at Royals

Bottom. Steamers were all about, their masts and many-coloured funnels rising above sheds. The houses ashore were yellow and white, with here and there a pink or blue one. The windows had green shutters, and canvas awnings stuck out over the pavements.

Yes, Marseilles was a very foreign place indeed, and all done in brightest technicolour.

The yacht remained home. A wooden gangway connected her with France, but she was England. Simon enjoyed that. A gypsy would have felt the same in his caravan. This was the right way to live, wandering always but always, snail-fashion, taking your own house with you.

Passers-by and idlers gazed at the smart white yacht with the same interest and admiration which he had given to gypsies' gay ships of the land.

Simon lit another cigarette and continued to watch the film. It was cool and pleasant down there in the stern. When the Countess came along the deck, swaying slightly as though the yacht were still at sea, he rose politely and with filial respect. She was dressed all in black, and the sunlight deepened the black to that of coal. Her face was flushed and her eyes were swimmy; she brought with her the mingled breaths of expensive perfume and brandy. Simon was not shocked to see she was more than a little drunk. Captain Pamphillion and Dr. John had gone ashore on business. It was natural for her to seize the opportunity to have a little extra, particularly after the recent shock of Wilson's death.

"So that is Marseilles, dear boy," she said hoarsely, lowering herself with a grunt of relief into a chair. "A hot and dirty town. They have amusing picture shows, but you are a little too young for them, and me—ah, me!—I'm much too old."

"I was thinking it looked like the pictures," said Simon.

"Not like those pictures," said the Countess, and chuckled. "How shocked your poor dear father would have been! Bingo took me, of course: He was such fun, dear Bingo. There are moments when the sun shines like this and we're in France again, when I could wish I hadn't killed him. And yet, I don't know—! Perhaps it was all for the best. I shall not go ashore. Too many memories, and it would be hardly seemly.

After all, I'm still in mourning for darling Wilson. You didn't murder him, Peter, did you, because you didn't fancy him as a stepfather?"

"No, mother," said Simon, "I didn't."

"I'm glad," said the Countess. "The only possible objections to Wilson would have been snobbish. I shouldn't like my boy to be a snob."

Simon shook his head and smiled, admitting that he had nothing to be snobbish about.

"There's always a new puzzle aboard the *Stormalong*," said the Countess. "I suppose it helps to make life interesting. Now it's who killed Wilson. Do you know, Peter?"

"No," said Simon.

"It might have been anyone. Or, of course, he might have done it himself, as I'd turned him down flat as a pancake. Behind his dignified bearing, he was of a most passionate and romantic nature. Peter, if I could tell you of his wooing! He nearly swept me off my feet. Such ardour, such poetry, such sex appeal. He worshipped me. I was his idol, his star. He was fire, all fire. What a man!"

This description hardly seemed to fit the steward Simon had known, but Simon expressed no surprise. If this was the Wilson the Countess wished to remember he was content.

"I really think," she went on, "he—"

Simon never heard what his mother really thought, for suddenly she closed her eyes and went to sleep like a huge, inflated baby save for the fact that her dimples played because she snored gently. Simon did not disturb her. His mother felt like a peaceful nap?—she was quite entitled to it.

He had Marseilles to watch.

The sun went down, the shadows lengthened, and the air cooled. A liner hooted three times, hoarse and loud. Little puffs of steam went up. Near by hot and gritty men were loading bright red tiles into a sailing boat with two masts—a boat in a film. They slid the tiles down a plank into her hold. They talked a lot, and sometimes stopped and drank from bottles, but whilst Simon watched they ate into the scarlet mountain at a surprising rate. A lorry went by laden with large earthenware jars, as tall as beer barrels. Simon guessed they held wine. Wine was a great drink in France.

His eyes felt dazzled, and, just as if he were in the Regal, he closed them.

Mother and son slept side by side, and let the pageant go by.

The clamour of the land didn't disturb them, but when the chef appeared on deck and beat the gong that had been Wilson's, those familiar notes of their own world woke them immediately.

"As I was saying," the Countess resumed, "I still think an English rose is preferable to any orchid."

"Yes, mother," said Simon.

Electric fans stirred the air in the saloon, and Mary Jane awaited them with her reserved but friendly smile.

"I thought," she said, indicating a silver tray, shaker and glasses, "that as we're having just a happy little meal together, only the three of us, we might make it a quiet celebration. Cocktails and a bottle of wine to follow.

"Red hot idea!" said the Countess. "Let's get busy. God only knows when Dr. John will pop back full of rules and regulations."

"It's a good cocktail," said Mary Jane, demurely. "I mixed it myself."

If this struck Simon as a surprising performance on the part of a daughter of an East End saint he didn't mention it.

"What a clever child you are!" said the Countess. "Your father, the distiller, must be a man in a million."

The cocktail was certainly a good one, and much better than the ready-bottled variety as sold at The Pheasant.

The meal was also different from those Simon had eaten in the old days. There was iced soup, baby lobsters and cold turkey and salad, with water ices and dessert. Since his rebirth, however, Simon had grown accustomed to such fare and accepted it as every day.

The Countess was in high spirits and chattered gaily on many subjects, branching from this to that and back again, now slangy, now precise. She decided to take a little brandy to settle her stomach, and refused coffee.

"Dangerous stuff, coffee!" she declared. "If people only realized it—a form of Eastern dope. Your dear father always said so, Peter. Ah, how I wish he was here tonight. Perhaps he

is in spirit, hovering unseen. Have you ever gone in for spiritualism, Peter?"

"No," said Simon.

"We must arrange a séance some time. So very thrilling, and the most amazing things happen. Tambourines! Trumpets! It would prove a great deal if a shower of buttons materialized. Yes, we must do that. If not here, somewhere else. Great fun. And how proud your father would be of his son, my darling. Once at a séance. . . ."

Away she went, and Simon and Mary Jane were a dutiful audience.

"You know, Peter," she said, then, "I think you should go ashore for a stroll and stretch your legs. Don't go too far away, and don't speak to anyone. Perhaps we'll go sightseeing tomorrow. I feel for your sake we should." She opened her bag and said, "Oh, dear, I haven't a cigarette. Be a pet, Mary Jane, and slip down to my cabin." Mary Jane obeyed with her usual alacrity. "Peter, dear," said the Countess promptly, "while you're about it you might get me a couple of bottles of Pernod. There's a little café I happened to notice along the dock. Here's some money which will more than cover it. And just in case there's any difficulty I happen to have the name on this piece of paper. Pernod is wonderful for a bronchial condition. It's like aniseed only nicer. You needn't make a great display about getting it aboard. Have them wrap it up for you. Dr. John's so funny. He doesn't like me to take any medicine except what he orders." She gave him one of her winks. "Put the money away, dear boy, and beat it," she said. "Here comes Mary Jane, and her eyes are as sharp as a hawk's."

"Right you are, mother," said Simon, and, having kissed her affectionately on the brow, went on deck. As he did so, Spike emerged from the fo'c'sle, and Simon, just lighting a cigarette, remembering those he had smoked in the middle watch, strolled forward and offered the packet.

"Thanks," said Spike. "Going ashore?"

"Just for a stroll."

"Care to come with me?"

"Good idea," said Simon. "Have you been here before?"

"No," said Spike. "That was the worst of minesweepers."

We never got further foreign than Hull and dumps like that. Still, I know the ropes. I'm a Cockney as well as a sailor. I'll show you the sights. Got any money, Simon?"

Simon produced two £5 notes, and Spike whistled.

"I've got to get some drink called Pernod."

"It couldn't cost a tenner if it was made of pure gold," said Spike, his freckles dancing. "Come on, Simon. We'll paint the old town red. I'll show you Life with a capital L. This ain't no country village."

He started off down the gangway.

Night had fallen, and Marseilles blazed with lights. It looked much brighter and more exciting than any fair. Stars crowded the purple sky. Hills rose round about, their darkness slashed intermittently by the headlamps of cars on winding roads. The lady on top of the church held a lantern now. It burned, tranquil and warm, high above the world. The sailing boat had swallowed the mountain of tiles and the dock was deserted. Smells of ships and sea and cargoes mingled in the air which had grown warmer again.

As soon as they stepped out into the busy streets it was they who were the foreigners, they who were different. Not that Marseilles paid them any attention—the place had seen too many such as they—but they were seafarers strayed from their own world. Spike was all wrong in his boast that because he came from London and was a sailor he knew the ropes. He was a sailor first of all, and for that reason was as much out of water now as any country bumpkin would have been, as much so as Simon himself. And if he stayed at sea for fifty years it would still be the same. The point worked itself out quite clearly in Simon's simple mind.

"Funny people, the Frogs," said Spike, putting on a superior air, strutting a bit like a cheeky sparrow, "all yattering away in French. Every second place a caff, and all sitting out on the pavement to have their drinks. I suppose it's a good idea, but it don't seem kind of natural, do it? Give me a pub."

"Me, too," said Simon, for the caffs seemed over smart and bright and crowded.

"You'd think everybody in the world could talk the same language," Spike complained.

And a little later, "We'll have to get our money changed, and they're sure to chisel us."

Obviously, Spike didn't feel as much at home as he'd anticipated. They were walking up a long, wide street now, crowded with traffic and full of people. Men with sharp eyes drifted with them, Simon felt only waiting for them to perch somewhere to pounce. There were lots of fast girls about who smiled and winked and nodded and patted empty chairs.

"Nice bits of stuff," said Spike in a man-of-the-world way, "but suppose they only spoke French?"

"Yes," said Simon. That was certainly a difficulty.

"Better go into one of these caffs and have some beer," said Spike. "We could make them understand what we want, and they'd change our money, I s'pose." But he seemed reluctant to try the experiment. "Might as well pick out the best," he said.

They wandered on.

A man like a crow, most smartly dressed in a check suit, a green felt hat and pointed tan shoes, appeared before them, affable and smiling, greeting them as old friends.

"'Ullo, 'ullo," he said, "'ere I am, you see? You 'aving good time?"

"You bet," said Spike.

"I think you want better. I show you." He produced a card from his pocket. "See 'ere? This is where you have good time, gents." The card was a map of the town. A black fingernail pointed at a cross. "Good place for British sailors. Square deal joint. No trouble: Beer and fine girls. That street over there. First left, first right, first left. See you, 'ere now, it's all 'ere. Bass in bottle. I'm your fine pal, gents."

Spike was much relieved. He slipped the man a half-crown in a furtive and apologetic way so's not to hurt his feelings.

The stranger wasn't offended. He popped the coin into his pocket, winked, indicated the street again, and vanished in the crowd.

They stood looking at the card. Beneath the map was printed:

Don't turn over. That's my business.

So, of course, they turned over, and read:

THE RAM OF DERBYSHIRE

British Pub

BEER IN DRAFT AND BOT

WINES & SPRITS

Price reasonable

Money Change

THE HOME FROM HOME

Prop. MOLLY MALLOY (MRS.)

Spike nodded shrewdly.

"What did I tell you? Just what the doctor ordered. This'll be a bit of all right. What a name for a pub, eh? I don't suppose they'd stand for it in England. Come on, Simon."

Remembering just in time that the traffic used the wrong side, they crossed the wide street and followed the chart. They had a purpose and a plan now; they weren't wandering at a loss any more. Spike whistled gaily.

No tables on the pavement outside The Ram, and the windows were snugly closed, the blinds decently drawn. A proper sign, with a ram with curly horns, swung above the door. The paintwork was sober and brown. Nothing fancy and foreign about the place.

"I said you could leave it to me," Spike rejoiced.

The problem of what to do in Marseilles was solved.

"That cove earned his half-dollar," said Spike.

They pushed open the door and went in, and all was as it should have been. The room wasn't Frenchified and fancy, but, indeed, home from home. There was a proper bar with a brass rail for the feet, and statues of a white horse and Johnny Walker on the shelves at the back. Familiar posters for Bass and Worthington and Guinness and Schweppes graced the walls. The air was thick with tobacco smoke. British faces were all about, and plain English—very plain English some of it—was the language. A cheerful party in a corner, who might have dropped in from a chara, were singing "Lily of

Laguna." All diffidence gone, no longer strangers in a strange land, Simon and Spike went to the bar.

"Good-evening, me boys," said Mrs. Malloy. "What'll you have?"

She was a fine figure of a woman, motherly and genial, yet dignified, inspiring confidence and exuding friendliness. She wouldn't have been a bit out of place as a licensee in East Ham or Royals Bottom.

They returned her greeting with warmth, and the respect due to her position. Spike ordered two Bass, and Simon put a note on the counter. Mrs. Malloy, like a good business woman, inspected it carefully, and gave him a wad of French money in return. She assured them that she always gave the official rate, and urged him to count them to be sure. As Simon would have been none the wiser he didn't bother.

"Just in?" asked Mrs. Malloy.

"Tied up this afternoon," said Spike. "Cigarette?" Mrs. Malloy accepted with pleasure. "Good idea having those cards with the map, missus."

"Nothing's too much trouble for sailors," said Mrs. Malloy. "And what do you think of Marseilles?"

"Not much," said Spike, dismissing the place with a gesture.

"Faith, nor me either. Too many of these Frenchies about, eh?"

"That's just it," said Spike. "Frogs. Been here long?"

"Forty years."

"Blimey!" said Spike taken aback. "Still, you're right as rain so long as you stay in here."

"And that goes for you boys, too," laughed Mrs. Malloy, and proved what a good sort she was by standing them a drink.

They relaxed and took their ease. Home were the sailors, home from the sea.

Two girls came in. They were hatless and good-looking, a blonde and a brunette. Mrs. Malloy greeted them with delight and called them over.

"'Tis a grand bit of luck you chancing in tonight of all nights," she said. "Here are two lads just out from home, and me wondering who could entertain them. Now, me boys,

you've fallen right on your feet. Here's Margot and Sylvia, the nicest lassies in France. If you were me own sons I wouldn't ask better. And as English as you are. Aren't they a sight for sore eyes?"

"Hullo, gorgeous," said the blonde. "I'm Margot. What's your name?"

"Simon."

"Nice," said Margot. "O.K. somehow. You're pretty good-looking, though you don't seem to know it."

She smiled up at Simon in warm approval.

"And so are you," said Simon, for that was the truth.

Margot was quite the prettiest girl he had ever spoken to. With the exception of Miss Enid, who was different, there wasn't anyone to touch her in Royals Bottom—certainly not Daphne. Margot had sparkling blue eyes and a big cheery mouth. She was built on generous lines, but the lines were firm and flowing. Her skin was clear and smooth, and her dress plain and summery.

"Will you have a drink, Margot?" he asked.

"Sure," said Margot.

She didn't need to order. Mrs. Malloy served her immediately with a small glass. Simon had another Bass. Spike and Sylvia had got off all right. They were quite happy.

"Let's all go and sit down. Come on, beautiful."

No waiters in dress clothes at The Ram. They took their own glasses and found a table. It was plain wood with kitchen chairs. The crowd in the corner were singing again: "There was I, waiting at the church."

Simon and Margot raised their glasses. Spike and Sylvia were fully occupied with each other. Simon considered Margot carefully with his dark and innocent eyes.

"I like you," he said. "You're all right. You're a peach."

Margot laughed, but fondly with a little sort of catch in it. She, in turn, considered Simon.

"You're a funny boy," she said, "but I don't mean funny in that way. You don't go with girls much, do you?"

"When I was home I was married," said Simon.

"And aren't you now?"

"No."

"I was married, too. A Frenchman. I met him on a day trip

to Boulogne. He came over to England after. I was a mug. You ought to have heard him talk love in broken English, and did he know his stuff? We came back to France, and that's how I'm here."

"What happened to him?"

"God knows," said Margot. "Something rotten, I hope, thought I suppose he's still going strong."

Simon nodded, and had a drink.

"You're like a girl on the pictures, only not so made-up," he said. "It's a treat to be with you, friendly and nice. I didn't expect to meet a real English girl like you tonight. Apart from when I was a prisoner I've lived all my life in Royals Bottom. It's only a small place. I was only in London once, and then just passing through. I haven't been around much. It makes me feel proud to be out with you, Margot."

Margot had listened to this speech with pleasure. It wasn't a lie; it was just the truth. Simon's face glowed with admiration. He looked handsome as a statue, and very clean and quiet and strong. She hadn't met anyone like this in The Ram before; she hadn't met anyone like this anywhere. He was as natural as—as a tree. Margot plied her trade in Marseilles, and she hadn't a heart of gold, but she had a heart. It was touched.

"Simon," she said suddenly, leaning forward so as not to be overheard, "I suppose you do know what kind of a girl I am?"

Simon nodded promptly.

"Oh, yes, Margot," he said, "you're a whore."

She flung back her head and laughed so spontaneously and freshly that girls at other tables looked over in surprise, and seeing Simon whispered together.

"So long as that's clear, Simon."

"Oh, yes, that's clear," he said. "Only it doesn't make any difference to what I was saying. You're beautiful."

"Really?"

"I wouldn't tell you you were if you weren't, would I?"

Again Margot laughed that happy laugh.

"I don't believe you would, darling," she said.

She put a cool, firm arm about his neck, and drawing his face down, kissed him on the mouth with lips which were still

laughing. They seemed to be quite alone in the crowded bar. She took her time about it.

"There!" she said, sitting back again.

"That's what I call a kiss," said Simon. "Best ever I had."

"You're coming home with me in a while, aren't you, Simon? I'm your girl?"

"Yes," said Simon.

"I shan't rob you, and you needn't be afraid."

"Why should you rob me? Why should I be afraid?" asked Simon.

"You're the nicest thing that ever happened to a whore," said Margot gaily. "Let's have another drink. No more of that damned grenadine. Bring me a Bass, too, Simon. It's nice for a girl to be out with her best boy."

The Ram was as gay as any ornate caff, brilliant with lights and a-bubble with gaiety.

II

The first grey mist of dawn came over the hills and even Marseilles was quiet in the brief gap between the late sleepers and the early risers. Spike and Simon walked back to the *Stormalong* down the middle of cobbled streets where there were no buses or trams or cars. The new day freshened the air.

Spike was in high spirits.

"It makes you proud to be English," he said. "What a pub, and what girls! I'll bet none of those Frogs had a night half as good. I hope it's okay about the fiver, Simon. I'll pay you back."

"No need," said Simon. He spoke dreamily, and though he was much too polite not to listen to Spike he seemed to be a long way off.

"I couldn't be mean with Sylvia," Spike explained. "The poor kid hadn't had a square meal for days. I'm pretty tough, and no girl puts anything over me, but an English bit in a town like this—why, I simply couldn't argue."

"Ah, here's a caff open," said Simon. "Now I can get that stuff for mother."

"But we haven't any money," said Spike, concerned and self-reproachful.

"I have," said Simon, "unless it costs an awful lot."

"You have?" asked Spike, staggered. "Well, what do you know?"

He looked up at Simon, wagging his head, respectful—almost awed.

The little caff was empty, but a stout lady in black dozed behind a tiny zinc bar. She awoke and greeted them with enthusiasm, as if she found customers at that ungodly hour a delightful surprise.

"Two bottles of Pernod, please," said Simon.

"Pardon?" said the lady in black looking as if he had asked for the moon.

Simon remembered the paper the Countess had given him. It was a bit crushed now, but the Countess had printed the word with great care, and when he spread it on the bar the lady understood immediately.

"Ah, Pernod!" she said, just a bit differently.

She put glasses on the zinc.

Simon shook his head, and made signs to indicate a bottle. The lady jabbered, and produced one from a shelf. Simon held up two fingers. The lady began to look a little worried, but, after a shrewd glance at him, she set down the second. Simon put a bundle of notes on the bar. The lady looked at him again, smiled, and took some of the notes but not all. That was nice of her. Simon appreciated her kindness, and pushed another note across. She was delighted; she chattered like a parrot. At that hour, and with all the difficulty of explaining, it didn't seem worth having the bottles wrapped up. They left in a mutual babble of gratitude and incomprehension.

"I can't make it out," Spike complained. "You paid for all the drinks at The Ram, and yet you still have—I dunno!"

Simon didn't say anything. He was walking very lightly, and he smiled, the growing brightness of the day on his face.

They didn't notice where they were going in the foreign city of Marseilles. Their feet were taking them back to the docks as sailors' feet always do.

"Women are lovely and great fun," said Simon. "That's

one thing I've found out. It is very fine to love and be loved."

"Good God!" said Spike. "You don't mean to say you're going to try and get spliced to her?"

"Oh, no," said Simon.

Spike peeped up.

"Well," he said, "you're the queerest cove ever I met. You just stay quiet and everything falls into your lap. I wish I knew how you did it. Cor blimey!"

And there they were at the sleeping, ghostly yacht. The gangway had been taken in, but Spike put his hand on the edge of the dock and leapt down, light as a monkey. He took the bottles from Simon who jumped in turn. The morning dimmed the lamp of the lady on the church on the hill.

"What a night, eh?" whispered Spike. "I told you I'd show you around."

"What a night," said Simon quietly. "Thanks, Spike. Oh, gosh, I never felt so fine and sleepy in all my life."

III

The sleek and dapper little Frenchman, engaged by Captain Pamphillion, had cleared the table with the dexterity of a squirrel. Paul lacked Wilson's British dignity and aplomb, but was eager and willing, delighted with his new job, all flashing eyes and teeth. Simon wasn't surprised he was so pleased to be working in a yacht. It showed his good sense. And no doubt the pay was high. No need for Captain Pamphillion to be stingy with the Countess's money.

Simon and Mary Jane lingered over cigarettes in the saloon. The morning sun streamed in. Mary Jane was reading a letter. Simon didn't know whether it came from her wealthy distiller father, or from her widowed mother in the East End. He wasn't curious. It was no business of his. He thought, smiling to himself, of Margot. He wasn't sure whether he would go back to The Ram of Derbyshire again. Somehow he thought not. The night was perfect as it stood. It might be repeated, but it couldn't be the same.

The Countess entered. She was still in mourning for Wilson,

for her dressing gown and slippers were black. She looked as if it were she who'd been ashore last night and returned at dawn.

"Dear boy," she said, offering her cheek to be kissed. "I didn't get my letters done after all. The yacht was so quiet, with everyone away, that I turned in early and had a really good night. Did you enjoy your stroll?"

"Yes, mother," said Simon. "Very much."

"Dear Peter!" said the Countess, reaching up to pat his cheek. "I'm so very pleased."

A large block of a man with a square beard filled the saloon door.

"The police!" he said dramatically, sharp as a pistol-shot.

"Oh, dear," said the Countess, collapsing into a chair and clasping her heart, "who's been killed now?"

The large man wore a large black hat, and a cigarette drooped from the corner of his mouth, adding its ash to that which already lay like a light fall of snow on his waistcoat. His right hand remained in his pocket. Obviously it gripped a revolver. He looked savage and grim and determined, and his eyes were cold.

Mary Jane had started to her feet with a gasp of fear. Only Simon remained unmoved, a spectator.

"La Comtesse de Savroni?"

"Yes."

"You speak French?"

"Oh, dear, I'm afraid not. You see Bingo—"

"It is of no consequence. I have been put on the case because I speak English like the book. I, Chief of Detectives, Paul Mayol."

"Oh, I'm so glad you do," said the Countess. "Otherwise it would be so awkward. How d'you do? May I offer you a drink? But perhaps not when you're on duty. I know how strict policemen are. But you haven't told me yet why you're here, and who's the latest to—to pass on?"

"I am here, madame la comtesse, because there has been to the police a letter anonymous denouncing that there have been two murders on this yacht."

"Who could have written that?" asked the Countess, round eyes widening in surprise. "At least we didn't want to have to

wash our dirty linen in public. If I could find out I'd wring their necks."

Detective Mayol shrugged.

"There are many things we in our turn want to find out," he said. "Many things. The position is complex. These deaths occurred themselves outside French waters, it seems. Your yacht is British. That makes all difficult. But murder will out, as you say." He stepped into the room, followed by a silver-haired and dignified man, who wore formal dress, even to grey spats. He carried a silver-topped cane, and a gardenia graced his buttonhole. His face was very fresh and pink; his moustache close clipped. He looked most official and stately. "In these circumstances I have brought with me your new British Consul here in Marseilles whom I now present—Sir Mark Howard-Howard."

Sir Mark made a stiff bow.

"'Do,'" he said, behind his teeth. "Mos' unfortunate."

"It is only propriety that he should be here. I have spoken briefly with your Captain. He joins us now, and shall be questioned first. No one shall go ashore. Each in turn shall be examined in the saloon, alone. We shall send for you, as needed."

"Do, please, do," said the Countess. "And make yourselves at home. Ring for anything you need. The steward is new, of course, but he seems to be learning very well. Oh, I shall be so interested in what you find out. I've been wondering so much what happened to dear Bingo and darling Wilson. If you can only solve the mysteries I shall be—"

"No doubt," said Detective Mayol. "No doubt. If you now are so good as to leave us, and return when called."

Captain Pamphillion had entered, bluff and sailorly but with a guarded and buttoned-up expression on his big face.

"Come, Peter dear," said the Countess. "Sit with me. I'm simply bursting with excitement and curiosity."

"Yes, mother," said Simon.

They went out through the other door into the passage leading to the cabins. Mary Jane followed them, but not into the suite. Possibly she was upset at the arrival of the detective and wanted to collect her thoughts.

The sitting-room was pleasant, the woodwork walnut with

brocaded panels and much silk and large soft cushions on the large soft chairs and the couch. Occasional tables were dotted about, and on a sideboard stood decanters of whisky and brandy in a silver tantalus. Simon wondered if the small padlock had been changed, and whether his mother could still pick it with a hairpin.

The Countess dropped softly into one of the soft chairs. She suggested an even larger cushion.

"Oh, Peter," she said, "what a shock!—though I tried to carry it off with an air. My stomach's turning over. A blessing I thought of that Pernod. It's in your cabin, I suppose? Then slip along and get it, but don't let anyone see you."

"Yes, mother," said Simon, and did so, returning to find that the Countess had not been idle. A small table had been arranged with iced water, glasses, and an opened bottle of cough cure which breathed aniseed into the air. A patent corkscrew pleased the eye of one who had helped behind the bar on occasion. They could have used such a gadget in The Pheasant.

"You just put the ring round the cork and press," said the Countess. "Oh, my poor stomach! Pernod's the very best thing."

She took the opened bottle from him and poured the greenish-yellow stuff into two glasses. As she added water it turned cloudy and milky. The Countess wasn't taking any risks with her Pernod. She replaced the cork and hid both bottles in the depths of the chair. They vanished as if by magic. The smell of cough cure intensified.

"Down the hatch, and success to crime, darling," she said. "Ah!"

It didn't taste so good as the Countess had led him to believe. Had Dr. John prescribed it for him he would have accepted it readily enough as real medicine. Still, it started a small glow which wasn't at all bad.

"You must run along now," said the Countess, "though not until we've had just one more, Peter. Keep your head clear. What are you going to tell them?"

"The truth, mother," said Simon.

"That's his father's son speaking!" the Countess exclaimed fondly as she filled the glasses. "Tell the truth and shame the

devil. I shall do the same, of course, but it's all been so muddling. It would be so much easier if one knew what was the truth to tell. Those horrid men!—how I wish they hadn't come. Still, I'm glad the Consul's here to see British fairplay. He did at least look a gentleman. I wonder whatever they'll do to us?"

Without thinking she had drained her glass, and now replenished it.

"I think I'll wear my sailor costume," she decided. "That's young and ingenuous. They'll never suspect me of murder in that. Go along, Peter, darling, they might send for me next. Tell them the truth, but if you really did kill Wilson because you didn't fancy him as a stepfather I shouldn't mention that point."

"As I didn't I won't," Simon promised.

"It couldn't do any good, and it would be rather horrid to have a scandal in the family, my lamb."

His hand was on the knob when there was a knock and the door opened. Dr. John stood there and even that bat of a man couldn't conceal his concern and excitement.

"A word with you in a minute, Peter," he whispered hurriedly. "Must stand together." He passed into the cabin, sharp nose twitching as he sniffed. Simon glanced back. The Pernod had disappeared again. On the table the bottle of medicine stood by the glasses.

"This Marseilles air—so relaxing for the throat," his mother was saying. "Poor Peter and I—"

Simon coughed for his mother's sake, and closed the door.

Whether Pernod straight after breakfast was more potent than it tasted, or whether he was merely short of sleep, the idea of his cabin appealed to him. Also in the small world of the *Stormalong* new cross-currents worked. The air was troubled by those two strangers in the saloon. The outside world had intruded. Simon didn't mind, of course, but it was a queer feeling. He yawned.

But when he entered his cabin he found he had a caller. Mary Jane awaited him, and, after last night, it was odd to see her sitting on his bed, so prim and precise, so very unlike Margot. Her face was strained and pale, and she was wiping her eyes behind their glasses.

"I hate detectives," she said. "I hate them."

"I suppose everyone does," said Simon.

"He gave me such a start, barging in like that, Peter."

"So you didn't send the letter, Mary Jane?" said Simon.

"Me? Not likely!" She sprang up from the bed and ran to him, gripping his forearms desperately. "Peter, I'm in the hell of a jam. Either Dr. John or Captain Pam brought the police in, and you surely see why?"

"No."

"It's another of their dirty plots. They're out to get me off the *Stormalong* at any cost. They might even work together for the moment, and pin it on me."

"I don't see how they could," said Simon kindly. "Why should a respectable girl like you, and quite small into the bargain, go round pushing able-bodied men overboard?"

"She could, you know. There's nothing easier. And supposing they concocted a lot of ugly motives, and even went as far as to say they'd seen me do it?"

"But they didn't, did they?"

"They can say they did—they can say anything they like."

"I still believe," said Simon, "that they're more frightened of each other than of you, and if either of them got the police it's so's to get the other into trouble. And, anyway, you wouldn't go and kill the man you were in love with, and then your father."

"Father?"

Mary Jane was so startled that she freed his arms and stepped back to look up at him in blank astonishment.

"Wilson said he was."

"That slimy old crook!" cried Mary Jane. "He dared to tell you that? I'll bet he was trying to get you to tell him what I was up to."

"He might have been."

"Wilson my father! Oh, that's good!" Mary Jane laughed bitterly. "I'd rather be as I am and not know who my father was."

"The East End parson?" said Simon mildly. "The distiller?"

"Lies—all lies," said Mary Jane, resting her face against Simon. "Oh, don't you see, Peter, I'm only a girl playing a

lone hand among a lot of rogues. Every word they say is false, and I had to fight them with their own weapons. When I made up that Saint in the East End I was only trying desperately to get you on my side. I needed one friend, one ally."

"I don't see I should have been much good anyway," said Simon.

"Perhaps not. You're too innocent, too simple. But at least I hoped it would give me the feeling that I wasn't all by myself, and I hoped that you'd tell me what they were up to."

"But," said Simon, "if I had I should only have been repeating what they told me, and you've just said that would have all been lies. It wouldn't have got you anywhere, particularly as I'm not one of those clever fellows."

"Perhaps," sobbed Mary Jane, "but I was so lonesome. Promise me one thing, Peter. You'll do what you can for me with the detective? You won't let them put you up to do any dirty work?"

"I'll promise you that," said Simon.

"Ah," said Dr. John, entering without knocking. "And who was the young lady who said she wasn't setting her cap at the owner's son? I would apologize and withdraw, but I'm afraid the poor Countess needs your help, Mary Jane, to dress for her ordeal."

Mary Jane had started back at his first word and stood biting her lip, her glasses pushed awry, looking rather like a young schoolma'm furious at having allowed herself to be caught by the Head in a compromising situation. There was much she wanted to say, yet she dared not open her mouth. Bowed, forlorn, she stumbled out of the room.

"I wouldn't let your kindly heart be moved by that, my dear Peter," Dr. John advised. "That young lady is a tough character. She can look after herself, no matter what line she's been pulling on you." His shoulders hunched, and he stroked his sharp chin with a little claw. "Poison-pen writers are usually skirts," he mused. "I wonder if, after all, it was she who stirred up this hornets' nest?"

As Simon had no idea he remained silent.

Dr. John, as ever puzzled by the lack of a glib answer, peeped up at him anxiously.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "I agree. My original sus-

picion is correct. Captain Pamphillion is at the back of this, and I'd pay a lot of money to know what poison he's putting into their minds at this very moment. How was it they came to see him first? That was a smart move on his part. The first story they hear will be the one to stick."

"He is the Captain," said Simon. "I suppose it's natural that they should see him before the rest of us."

"But you see what an advantage it gives him? This is the time, Peter, when you and I must stand as one. I will not let you down—"

"Don't bother about me, Dr. John—"

"—And you mustn't fail me. Of course, I wouldn't ask you to tell anything but the truth. Still, there are ways of answering questions and expressing opinions. If you are asked, for instance—"

Captain Pamphillion came floating in, mopping his face and breathing heavily, as if he'd been running.

"Dr. John!—my poor friend," he said, "you are next, and I'm sorry for you."

There was a gloating note in this sympathy that wasn't reassuring.

"Did they give you a bad time, Captain Pam?"

"A bad time? A bad time, you say? They grilled me like a chop, and on both sides. These shore people! They're not fit company for a decent seafarer. I shall be glad to get back to the clean sea—if they'll let us go."

"And what did you tell them?" asked Dr. John.

"The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth—as it appears to me," said Captain Pamphillion. "I'm a blunt fellow, and I spoke bluntly. It's up to that Detective Mayol to draw his own conclusions from plain evidence, and, though they hammered me pretty badly, I've the satisfaction of knowing that I've put them on the right track and done Justice a service."

"I see," said Dr. John, and he scraped his chin, his mind very busy.

"If I didn't know how you hated drugs, Dr. John," said Captain Pamphillion, "I'd advise you to have a shot of something before you face them. But there's no time now. They're waiting, and believe me, that Frenchman's not a fellow to

rub the wrong way. He's in a black enough mood without that. Take my friendly tip, and get along to the saloon right away."

"Here goes then," said Dr. John. "I've nothing to fear."

The door closed behind him and Captain Pamphillion burst into the hearty chuckle of a blue-water man.

"He's got nothing to fear, eh? He's got nothing to fear? Gad, Peter, that's all he knows. A shipmaster's word still counts for something. I saw this was a God-given chance to straighten things out aboard. I fancy when we sail it will be without our brilliant surgeon, and the craft will smell better for that. If they don't arrest him it won't be any fault of mine. *And* Mary Jane as his accomplice. Then you and I, my boy, will really be sitting pretty. That's why, when your turn comes, you must show discretion. I would not prompt you. I only ask you to remember that you and I are honest men and the only friends the Countess, your mother, has in the world. This is our chance to rid her of these murderous criminals who plan to undo us all. Ah, my boy, I'll show you the happiest yacht afloat if only that Detective Mayol does his stuff."

He rubbed his big hands, and forgetting the trying time through which he had passed, loomed large and jubilant.

Simon's smile showed that he was glad to see Captain Pamphillion so much better, but he didn't feel called on for any comment.

"And now I must get up on topside. We're taking on water, fuel and stores. A yachtmaster's work is never done. And a brand-new steward to break in—hardly knows where his pantry is. However, he at least is reliable. I chose him myself. But before I go, Simon, old man, what have you in mind?"

"To have a kip," said Simon, taking off his shoes. "I didn't get back until all hours this morning."

Captain Pamphillion looked roguish.

"Naughty boy, Peter! Jack ashore, eh? The jack of hearts! I wonder what your mother would say if she knew?"

He paused to see the effect of this jovial threat, and paused in vain.

"Oh," said Simon, "she knows already. I told her all about it."

Captain Pamphillion couldn't help looking a trifle disappointed, but he said admiringly, "How wise you are, Peter,

to be so frank! You're a chap after my own heart in that. Well, I'll leave you to it, but have your wits about you when you face Detective Mayol."

"Oh, yes," said Simon, stretching out on his bed.

"Good! First-rate!" Captain Pamphillion swayed a moment as if he wanted to prolong the talk, decided it was no use, and went away.

Simon slept. Feet pattered on the deck above, and the noises of the port drifted in. A butterfly came through the open porthole and sailed about. Though he did not see the pretty thing Simon's lips smiled.

Spike awoke him hours later.

"Hey, Simon," said Spike. "Get cracking. You're next for the third degree."

Simon sat up refreshed and alert. His sleep had been healthy and untroubled.

"You been in, Spike?" he asked.

"You bet," said Spike, grinning widely. "There's nothing like telling all you know to the coppers. I told 'em plenty. Gave them some real good tips: Dr. John for a win, and the Cap and Mary Jane for places. I gave them all the dope. I'd been studying form, and those three were real possibilities. The more I talked the more sure I was I hadn't pushed the Count over that night. Didn't make sense. A little punch like that. Besides, I never meant no harm, and they did. Plenty of harm. So it was only right to let them carry the baby. And did I fix them! Oh, boy!"

Spike's freckles danced happily. He grinned from ear to ear.

"They're waiting," he said. "I'd like to be there to see what they make of you, Simon."

Simon put on his shoes and ran a comb through his tousled dark hair.

"I won't be hard for them," he said.

He went to the saloon, and at the door Spike, still grinning, gave him the thumbs-up sign.

Detective Mayol sat at the head of the table, pen in hand, a pile of papers before him. The Consul sat at his right. The *Stormalong* had done something to them. Mayol no longer looked grim and formidable. His face was moist and his eyes

a trifle wild, his black spade of beard seemed tangled. The well-groomed Sir Mark appeared dishevelled now. His stiff collar had wilted, his fingers fidgeted, and his face was weary. They looked unhappy and lost, Simon thought, for all the world like two flies trapped in a spider's web, and not knowing what to make of its sticky, puzzling threads.

Mayol consulted a list.

"This is the last," he said.

"Thank God," said Sir Mark from his heart.

"Sit," said Mayol, indicating the chair at the other end of the table. Simon obeyed, smiling in a friendly way.

"You know," said Mayol, wiping his lips on a crumpled handkerchief, "that you may be charged with a double murder?"

"No, I didn't know that," said Simon.

"What's your name?"

"Simon Smith."

They weren't surprised that was his name—only that he admitted it.

"Why are you known as 'Peter Mountford?'"

"Because the Countess thinks of me as Peter—she wants me to be him."

"And you?—you are anxious to please Madame la Comtesse?"

"Oh, yes," said Simon. "She is very kind. I'm fond of her."

Mayol leered briefly, and pointed his pen.

"And she of you?"

"Oh, yes," said Simon.

"Is that why you murdered the Count?"

"I didn't murder him. He was dead before I ever saw the *Stormalong*."

"And what about the man who'd proposed marriage?"

"I didn't kill him."

"Very well," said Mayol briskly. "Let us say you are as innocent as you look. Whom then do you suspect?"

"No one," said Simon.

There was a pause of utter astonishment, and then Sir Mark and Mayol leaned forward and studied Simon with great interest.

"You say you suspect nobody?"

Simon merely nodded. He'd answered that already.

"You haven't any hints for us? You don't recall little things about this or that one it might be as well for us to hear? Although he or she is your dearest friend you don't feel it is your duty to let us know so-and-so?"

"No," said Simon.

"Come," said Detective Mayol, turning to the Consul, "this at least is a change."

"And a mercy," said Sir Mark.

They both considered Simon with respect and something like admiration. A little of the strain went out of their faces. They even smiled faintly at him, sitting there so big and clean and open and handsome.

"How does an honest man come to be aboard the *Stormalong*?" Detective Mayol asked on a new note, a note of wonder.

Since they were so genuinely interested Simon told them his whole story, briefly, candidly, in simple sentences which palpably concealed nothing. The two tired men found this most refreshing. They sat back and took their ease, as if a cool breeze were suddenly blowing through the hot little jewel box of the saloon.

"Thank you," said Detective Mayol. "Thank you, Simon. I think we should have a drink. You drink, Simon?"

"Thank you," said Simon.

"And the ladies?" asked Mayol, his brown eyes bright above his black beard, his hands busy mixing stiff whiskys-and-sodas. "Do you get on with them very well?"

"Yes," said Simon.

"That I should imagine, yes," said Detective Mayol, placing the bubbling glasses on the table. "Otherwise it would seem the ladies have ceased to have eyes in their heads, and the natural instincts in their hearts and so on. Don't you agree, Sir Mark?"

"Rather!" said Sir Mark behind his teeth but with conviction.

They enjoyed their drinks in comfortable silence. Simon liked them both. It seemed to him that they had a very hard job to do. He sympathized with them, and wouldn't have swopped places for anything.

"Do you speak French, Simon?" asked Detective Mayol.

"Not a word," said Simon.

Despite their earlier experiences the pair accepted Simon's statement as true. They went into conference which was evidently of a highly confidential nature, yet they spoke aloud in French, freely, knowing that they could do so. Simon sipped his drink with enjoyment. He did not feel irked at being excluded. Theirs was a business talk, and their business wasn't his. Presently they exchanged nods, having come to some agreement.

"Simon," said Detective Mayol in a most amiable way, "You can keep your trap shut, can't you?"

"I'm not much of a talker," said Simon.

"That we know. Everybody was able to tell us what everybody else was going to say, except in your case. Then it was agreed that what you said should carry weight because it was true, but nobody knew just what it would be. They hazarded guesses and hopes. They were all wrong." He paused. "Sir Mark and I have come to a rather surprising agreement," he proceeded. "We're going to lay our cards on the table."

"You, too?" said Simon.

"Why do you say that?"

"Everybody lays their cards on the table for me."

Mayol and Sir Mark exchanged smiles.

"Can't blame 'em, what?" said Sir Mark.

"Our cards are going to surprise you," said Mayol.

"Are they?" said Simon with an interest which was only polite.

"Get on to this, Simon," said Mayol, no longer a formidable police officer, but a quizzical fellow, for all his black spade of beard. He wasn't French any more, but international. His eyes were merry. "We're not what we seem to be. Sir Mark here isn't Sir Mark, and the British Consul would have a couple of strokes if he knew what was happening this morning. And all I've ever had to do with the French detectives is dodge 'em."

"I see," said Simon.

Again the pair exchanged glances. Simon's serenity was still new to them.

"We were hired to put on this act to see if we could find out

certain things for someone which would give that someone a hold over dear fellow yachtsmen. Get it?"

"Yes," said Simon.

"You don't ask who this someone was?" Mayol demanded, unable to suppress his surprise any longer.

"No," said Simon. "You wouldn't tell me, or if you did it wouldn't be the truth. We're on board the *Stormalong*."

His listeners chuckled.

"'And a little child shall lead them,'" said Sir Mark, which was quite a speech for him.

"This baby knows his endives," said Mayol.

They lapsed into French again.

"Simon," Mayol resumed, "we're going to shoot the works. We were paid for this job, of course, but we figured between ourselves that we might be able to horn in on a more permanent basis. After what we've heard this morning we've changed our minds. This yacht is dynamite. A trifle like murder is just something you do and then play with as a pretty toy to pass on to the other guy and watch him try to juggle it. We may be crooks—we are crooks, I'll come clean on that—but we don't do much in the way of murder, and we don't fancy being murdered either. You don't seem to know it, Simon, but you might as well be making this little jaunt on the back of a crocodile. You'd be safer, perhaps. Now we like you, but we're not going to try to kid you we're philanthropists. It would pay us to get you a new job which would be a lot safer than being the Countess's son, and a whole heap more fun."

"I like being the Countess's son," said Simon, "and it is fun."

"It won't be fun when they want to get rid of you because they've tumbled to the fact that instead of being a chump they can use you're the spanner in the works. What we offer you is a holiday on the Riviera among the lovely ladies. And are they lovely! You'd make a fortune, Simon, and we'd deal straight—only a twenty per cent. cut on the gross."

"But what would I have to do?" said Simon.

"Plenty!" smiled Mayol.

"You dance?" asked Sir Mark.

"Not much," Simon admitted.

"He wouldn't have to dance—not with those features and those eyes," said Mayol.

"Swim?"

"No."

"He wouldn't have to swim," said Mayol. "With that body he'd only have to stand around and show himself. We're not much in funds, Simon, at the moment. We could stake you, of course, but it would be quite a help if you shake the old dame down for a nice little wad of folding money."

"Our friend means," Sir Mark hastened to explain, "that it would be very satisfactory if you could induce the Countess to let you have a few hundred pounds as a present, so that you could see something of France and—er—ahem—rejoin the yacht at another port."

Sir Mark was quite spent after this effort. He rose and attended to the glasses.

"I wouldn't like to do that," said Simon. "Everybody's out after her money."

"Why not you?" asked Mayol. "An only son is surely entitled to a little fling—especially if Mama happens to be a multi-millionairess."

"I like her, and I like it here on the *Stormalong*."

"You're crazy," said Mayol. "You'd like it better at Cannes and Juan and Monte, and there'd be no danger there of you turning into the finest looking corpse—finest looking that is until the fish get at you."

"The fish would have had me by now," said Simon, "if it wasn't for the Countess. If she wants me as a son she's entitled to have me."

"No good," said Sir Mark, restored by his drink. "The sea-green incorruptible! You're wasting your time, Bluebeard. This is outside our line of country. We've run up against something unique—an honest man. Better throw our hands in, what?"

"I suppose so," said Mayol sadly. "A pity. There's a fortune in him, handled properly. Life's a racket, isn't it? Things never seem to pan out. My, my, it's an awful crime we didn't pick up the Countess first. I suppose the trouble is we're small-timers and pikers. Oh, the hell! Let's have a last Scotch!"

They did.

"Well, it seems we can't fasten anything on you, Simon," said Mayol. "Not even a young and beautiful heiress with bucketsful of diamonds." He turned to Sir Mark and went on, as frankly as if he were speaking French. "If you're a big enough mug it pays dividends. Imagine what a hell we could have made life for him if we'd married him off to Elise or someone like that. Oh, boy, would we have bled him white?"

"True, true," agreed Sir Mark dispassionately, tugging his close-clipped silver moustache. Under the stress of the morning his gardenia had turned yellow.

They both shook hands with Simon.

"Been nice to know you, Simon, you sap" said Mayol, and his voice had a ring of affection.

"Charmed," said Sir Mark. "Charmed. Most unusual."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of any help in any way," said Simon. And he meant it, too. Nobody could have been nicer to him, and they had done their best to launch him on a new career.

Mayol had rung the bell and the steward appeared. Mayol gave him sharp orders. They finished their drinks. In trooped the Countess, Captain Pamphillion, Dr. John and Mary Jane. The little saloon became crowded and oppressive.

Mayol rose and took up his black hat and the sheaf of papers.

"The preliminary inquiry concludes itself," he announced curtly, back in his character-part again.

"You mean—?" asked Captain Pam.

"I mean it is all very complex. There is the difficulty that this is a British ship. We have learned much but"—he shrugged—"it is complex. That then is all for this present."

"And may we sail?"

"You may. We shall keep track of you should we need you."

"Oh, you dear man," the Countess cried, "you mean you know who did the murders, but you're not going to make an arrest?"

"Not yet," said Mayol, but the words had an ominous ring coming out of that black beard.

"Oh, what a relief," gasped the Countess, collapsing into a chair. "If there's one thing I hate more than another it's

scandal. Peter, darling, a drink quickly. I feel faint with happiness."

Detective Mayol subjected the group to a final searching survey of his cold eyes, and Sir Mark stood stiff and correct. With formal official bows they left the saloon.

Mary Jane provided a climax. She hadn't said anything about feeling faint, but she fainted, falling flat on the floor.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

WITH a gypsy's love for his caravan, Simon could feel that the *Stormalong* was comfortable and well-fed again.

Her tanks and store-cupboards were full; she was provisioned and replenished; she sat snugly lower in the water.

"Do you know, Peter," said the Countess, "I shall be glad to be off again, particularly after this morning. In harbour people can come bursting in so. At sea one feels quite safe."

"Yes, mother," Simon agreed. He was ready for further wanderings. The ominous warnings of the two impostors seemed unreal and fantastic in the golden sunshine. He thought happily of Margot, but the knowledge that he would never see her again caused him no regret. She was just right as she was. He did not want to go back; he wanted to go on.

"I intend to forget all about those murders," the Countess announced. She waved them away with her long cigarette holder. "They're in the hands of the police now, and that's a very comfortable feeling. Let the police do the worrying. It's what they're paid for. The chapter's closed. And talking of chapters, Peter, I often think if I had the time I could write a book about my life."

"I suppose you could, mother."

The Countess was launched on the general subject of books, and, though not a reader himself, her son gave her his usual loyal attention.

Captain Pam and Dr. John were ashore, but the Countess had decided it was too hot for sightseeing and Simon felt he had already seen the best of Marseilles. He was content enough in his mother's company, dwelling in a pleasant haze, their talk wandering as she willed. Amidships Spike swabbed away the last traces of the shore people's feet. A strange young man

stepped down the gangway, spoke to Spike, and came aft.

"Oh, God," said the Countess, "for the moment I fancied this was another detective come to arrest us all. I really couldn't stand that. But he's obviously English and quite good-looking. From the Consul, perhaps?"

The young man approached and raised his hat. Nothing wide-brimmed and Continental about it: a decent and sober brown felt.

"The Countess de Savroni?"

"Good-afternoon. Are you from Sir Mark?"

"No," said the young man whose smile was quite engaging, "but I wonder if you could help me? Do you know anything of this young lady?"

He produced an unmounted photograph from his wallet.

The Countess, who should have worn powerful glasses but naturally didn't, held it close to her nose and at arm's length, peering hard.

"It looks to me very like Mary Jane," she decided. "What do you think, Peter?"

"It is," said Simon.

"And she's aboard?" asked the young man casually.

"Down in her cabin," said the Countess. "If you want to speak to her just ask the sailor there and he'll call Paul. Paul is our new steward. He's French but speaks English."

"Thank you, Countess," said the young man. "I'll do that. Please don't disturb yourself. It's just a personal call. A lovely day."

"Quite lovely," said the Countess.

The young man went back to Spike who took charge of him.

"I'm glad he wasn't from Sir Mark," the Countess said. "I feared it might be an invitation to some official 'do.' They're such a frightful bore, as a general thing, and since we're sailing soon we couldn't have accepted anyway, and that would have seemed rude. Fancy him wanting to see Mary Jane! One really never associates the dear girl with followers and men and all that kind of thing. Oh, well, it will make a nice break for her. I remember when I was her age—"

Simon listened to his mother's reminiscences with proper

attention until they trailed off and stopped. The Countess snored gently but with enjoyment. In that honeyed air her example was infectious. Simon stretched out his legs, lolled back, and closed his eyes.

"Please wake up, oh, please!"

Mother and son obeyed. Mary Jane stood before them, dressed for going ashore in a light coat and small halo hat, carrying a suitcase. She looked as neat and trim as ever, but her manner was a shade excited.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, Countess," she said, "but I've had news."

"The young man—?"

"My brother."

"You never told me—?"

"I hadn't seen him for years. I thought he was dead. But he came home just in time. My father is very ill. Poor Papa—"

"The distiller?" said the Countess, speaking the word with the pleasure it always gave her.

"Yes, poor Papa. He's—he's in a bad way—very bad—and was ordered to the South for sunshine. He's staying up at Avignon, and wants me to go to him."

"But of course!"

Tears glittered behind her glasses.

"I'm very much afraid it won't be a long visit from what Wilfred tells me. If I may I'll rejoin you as soon as I can."

"Of course," said the Countess. "You've earned a holiday. Stay away as long as you like. You know our plans. Pick us up at your own convenience. Money! What about money?"

Mary Jane shook her head firmly.

"It's sweet of you, dear Countess," she said, "but I shan't need any. My brother drove down to get a specialist, and heard at the Consulate that I was here in the *Stormalong*. It was a—a miracle. He's gone ahead now, and I'm meeting him at his hotel. I shall take a taxi. I've plenty for that, and then, of course, Wilfred and Papa will look after everything." Tears ran on her cheeks. "Oh, I hate leaving you, I hate it!" she said. "I wouldn't dream of it if I didn't have to."

"It won't be for long, dear," soothed the Countess.

Mary Jane was too upset for further words. She stooped

down suddenly and brushed the Countess's cheek with her lips. She grasped Simon's hand and pressed it hard and meaningly.

"Look after her, Peter dear," she said. "Please look after her."

Then she turned away and ran along the deck, up the gangway and down the dock. The little figure, looking almost Quakerish, seemed touching and incongruous in that colourful Latin world.

"Bless the poor darling," said the Countess. "We shall miss her. I don't wish the distiller any harm—in fact I hope he makes a quick recovery—but I do hope he doesn't rob me of my Mary Jane for too long. I don't know how my liver will get along at all. You see, Peter, my liver . . ."

Simon heard all about his mother's liver.

Dr. John returned and joined them. He had had a most interesting time ashore, and had seen some fine modern art at the gallery. The news of Mary Jane's temporary absence banished his interest in modern art.

"May I speak freely, Hilda?"

"Do you ever do anything else, Dr. John?"

"It mightn't be a bad thing if she never came back. A charming and willing girl, but really a little young and untrained for such a responsible—vital—position. I've hesitated to speak before because I know how good-hearted you are. But I have a trained nurse in mind who would be much more competent. It would only need a wire from me to make her drop whatever she had in hand and come hot-foot. She would understand that I wouldn't send for her unless there was real need. And what a woman! Superlative in every branch of her profession. Shall I slip ashore now before we sail and—?"

"No, no, Dr. John," said the Countess. "I couldn't dream of it. You're really too kind. We'll manage as best we can for a day or so, and then, I'm sure, we'll hear from Mary Jane that she's coming back."

"I don't like the idea—I don't like it at all," he said. "However, I shall have to insist if we don't hear at Monte."

"If we don't you may, dear Dr. John."

Captain Pamphillion breezed up, rubbing his hands.

Apparently he, too, had had a good time ashore.

"Are we ready for sea?" he asked. "Do we return with relief to the bounding main?"

"Yes, let's," said the Countess. "It will be funny sailing without Mary Jane."

"What's this?" asked Captain Pamphillion, casting a suspicious glance at Dr. John who hunched his peaked shoulders. The Countess explained again, and Captain Pamphillion listened closely, trying to discover what was at the back of all this, quite refusing to believe that the story he heard was the truth.

"You'll never see her again," he said. "There's a post-office just off the dock. I have a cousin—a splendid woman who's been a lady's companion for many years. She happens to be free at the moment. Let me send her a telegram—"

"One moment, Captain Pam," Dr. John interposed in the most friendly way. "It is typical of you to be so concerned for Hilda, but this matter is very much in my province. I have already offered to obtain a most suitable person—a nurse who holds the award of the Royal Red Cross—and Hilda has agreed to accept her services unless we hear that Mary Jane is returning in the immediate future."

Captain Pamphillion's big mouth opened in a ring but nothing came out of it. He turned on his heel and bounced off to the wheelhouse.

"Dear Captain Pam," said Dr. John fondly. "Such a fine sailor, but so touchy. He mightn't be alive today but for my attention, and yet if he's crossed in any little matter he flies into a pet like a child. Hilda, let's have a stirrup-cup to celebrate leaving this rather unhappy port. Shall I tell Paul?"

"As fast as you can, Dr. John," said the Countess.

Dr. John paused a moment.

"I think we should keep an eye on Paul," he said, "I'm sure he's going to be quite an excellent steward but, after all, we know nothing of him, and Marseilles is noted for its rogues. True, Captain Pam engaged him, but the worthy Captain is more of a sailor than a man of the world. However, let's hope for the best, and, in the meantime, drink and be merry."

II

The beauty of the night imposed a musing silence on Simon, Dr. John and Captain Pamphillion. They stood in a group, smoking and watching the coast go by. It rose against the stars in an uneven purple band, festooned with a chain of lights which spread out at intervals into great diamond clusters which sparkled, glittered and pulsed. Traffic on unseen roads linked the clusters with living beads. The *Stormalong* stole through the darkness, the waters swishing silkenly from her bows. Above, a crescent moon sailed like a silver boat.

Standing between his two friends Simon wondered idly, as a matter of no consequence, which of them had engaged Sir Mark and Detective Mayol. Had it been worth the expense? Had they found out anything of value? He doubted it very much. Both had been ashore and could have received reports. If it came to that the young man might have brought a message for Mary Jane from those amusing rogues. Perhaps they had found a job for her. That distiller father wasn't a very real figure. The questions drifted through his mind, and he did not trouble himself seeking answers. Life in the *Stormalong* had confirmed his belief that that was a profitless occupation. The only way to be happy out in this bewildering wide world was to accept things as they came and not to worry and fret. He was content to be Simple Simon, and that was as well for he couldn't have been anyone else.

And his mother, though she might wander a bit and dwell in a haze, had a way of hitting the nail on the head. She was quite right about the Count and Wilson. They had been left far astern; they had drowned in the sea like the noisy town of Marseilles; their deaths were remote, further away than Gibraltar. The *Stormalong* went on.

The peace was shattered by a burst of agitation which exploded with a pop, like a balloon.

The Countess was responsible.

She had appeared suddenly behind them, and even in the darkness Simon knew that she was quivering and shaking.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" she cried, and her breath left her. She stood there, dim-seen, fighting to get it back.

Her son and her friends started about, anxious and concerned.

"Hilda?"

"Mother?"

She won her fight for breath.

"Those men! They weren't a detective and the British Consul. They weren't! I had a feeling—! I'm always right when I have a feeling! They were nothing but common thieves and robbers."

"Thieves?"

"Robbers?"

Captain Pamphillion and Dr. John both jumped at that, apparently equally concerned that the deception should have been found out. Only Simon remained undisturbed.

"What fools they made of us!"

"Mother, dear, what is it?" asked Simon.

His mother clung to him, a soft and trembling burden. He put his kindly arm about her.

"My diamonds, my rubies, my pearls—gone! All gone! And all the notes I kept in the top drawer in case I needed ready cash. I hadn't counted it for ages but there must have been nearly two thousand pounds in bank notes. Gone! All gone! Oh, those horrid men. I had a feeling—"

The Countess and Simon were left alone. Their companions had vanished.

"There, mother, there," soothed Simon.

"I hoped one day your wife would wear them," the Countess sobbed. "And your daughters! And their daughters! And now they've been stolen by a couple of lousy French crooks."

"I don't see very well how they could have stolen the things, mother," Simon reasoned. "They were only in the saloon, and someone was with them all the time."

"But who else could have done it?"

Simon, with customary delicacy, didn't answer. He knew how fond his mother had been of Mary Jane. People were really extraordinary. When he thought of that pleasant young woman he blinked in unusual surprise. There was certainly no telling. And why had she suddenly become a common thief when, on her own admission, she had had far more clever plans and much higher ambitions? It was no part of a man's

duty to distress his already distressed mother by speaking such troubling thoughts aloud.

"There, mother, there," said Simon, and held her closer.

"Oh, Peter, what would I do without you?" the Countess asked. "You're so wise and strong. So gentle. Not a word of reproach from you for a silly old woman who was too trusting, and didn't act on her intuition. Oh, darling, I don't suppose it really matters, so long as you're not cross."

"How could I be cross, mother?"

Captain Pamphillion loomed, a dark, angry, hot thunder-cloud.

"Everything of value's gone from my cabin," he boomed. "Everything! My watch, my gold pen, even my best cuff-links. The little bitch! She didn't need things like that after the killing she's made in your suite, Hilda. It was nothing but spite!"

"She—?" echoed the Countess.

The bat flitted up.

"My dress studs, my diamond ring, the gold cigarette case Princess Bareta gave me—gone!" he said, his voice a rasping hiss.

For a brief space there was silence. Even the Countess's sobs had stopped.

"You mean—?" she said at last, shocked, bewildered.

"Of course!" rasped Dr. John. "Who else, Hilda? I warned you all along against her."

"And so did I," said Captain Pamphillion.

"If you'd only listened to me—!"

"And me—!"

"Such venom in that snake in the grass. To rob you, yes, Hilda. That was her purpose aboard. But to pillage his few trinkets from a poor professional man! To sink as low as that! It would make you feel she was the very devil, if you chanced to believe in the devil. But don't let's stand here jabbering. Let's get back to Marseilles at full speed."

"Toulon would be quicker," said Captain Pamphillion, and a moment later his large shape was swallowed by the wheelhouse.

Even in the first shock of loss, even in bitterness and anger, Dr. John's mind had continued to work.

"Her accomplice," he said. "The young man. Where does he come in? She could have done it as a solo job, and not had to split with anyone."

"Don't you see?" mourned the Countess. "He was the poor girl's evil genius. He had some grip on her. She was only a child—putty in his hands. Oh, the filthy swine. I saw he was a tick the moment I set eyes on him. Just like a swine like that to claim to be her brother."

A son of less natural understanding might have pointed out that the young man had never made that claim. Simon, silent, patted his mother's arm.

The moon, the stars and the shore swung and changed their places, and the *Stormalong* heeled slightly. The metallic clang of the engine room telegraph sounded a note of urgency. The pulse of the engines quickened.

"At least," Dr. John consoled himself, "we're rid of her—even at a price."

"I still can't believe it," said the Countess. "I really can't. She'd never rush off like that without explaining or anything. She must have left a note. Peter, come down to her cabin with me. I know she seemed to be in rather a hurry, but such a charming girl couldn't be so rude!" Simon assisted her to the companion-way, and Dr. John followed. "Did she take anything of yours, dear?" asked the Countess, checking a moment in concern.

"I'm lucky, mother," said Simon. "I have nothing to be stolen."

"I'm so glad, Peter. It's somehow so like you to be as rich as any young man alive and yet even robbers can't harm you, Oh, that is a comfort to me."

"I'm glad, mother," said Simon, for she needed comforting just then.

"We're on a wild-goose chase," said Dr. John. "You can bet your life there won't be anything in Mary Jane's cabin."

Simon opened the door and turned on the light.

Dr. John was wrong.

On the bed, handcuffed ingeniously to the post, his legs tied tightly with towels, a towel thrust as a gag into his mouth, lay the young man who had called on Mary Jane. He had a large lump on his head, and blood matted his hair, streaked his face

and stained the pillow. Relief and anguish shone in his staring eyes.

"Great God!" said the Countess, and floating vaguely to the only chair subsided in it with a squishing sound of collapse.

"Now what in heck does this mean?" Dr. John wondered, approaching the bed warily as if he suspected that the young man was a trap of some kind.

Simon stood and stared. It was all very strange.

The prisoner writhed the little he could—for he was trussed most cunningly—indicating that he would much prefer to be free.

"Peter, ring the bell," said the Countess. "We shall need brandy. Not only this poor young man, but all of us. Oh, dear!"

Simon obeyed, and Dr. John, curiosity overcoming caution, removed the gag.

The young man gulped and coughed and spluttered. The fluffy towel had been in his mouth many hours. That hadn't been fun. In fact nothing that had happened to him aboard the *Stormalong* had been fun. Simon, who had been trussed up on occasion and hit on the head, could sympathize with him.

"Right—trouser pocket," the prisoner croaked.

Dr. John's little bony hand found the key, and, after considering whether it was a wise move, unlocked the handcuffs. The young man rolled into a sitting position and groaned. His muscles were stiff, his very bones ached. Hands clasped between knees, head hanging down, shoulders hunched, he came back to life. The bump on his head wasn't pretty.

Paul stood at the door, gaping, astounded. Simon smiled reassuringly at him and told him to bring brandy quickly. The steward was new to the yacht. He wasn't accustomed to surprises.

The young man looked up.

"Got a fag? Been a long time."

Dr. John supplied cigarette and light.

"Where are we?" asked the young man.

"Heading for Toulon, the nearest port," said Dr. John. "There's been a robbery. Jewellery worth the world and two thousand in cash. Who are you? What happened?"

He stood before the young man, shoulders raised, head

thrust forward, suspicious and watchful. Dr. John always expected the worst and was on guard.

"John Masson," said the young man, still croakily. "From Scotland Yard. Detective-sergeant, though I should be pounding the beat for this little lot." He groaned, and raising his arm stiffly touched his scalp with tentative fingers. A spasm of pain crossed his face. "The little hellcat!" he said. "I turned away for a second to ring the bell for the steward so's I could get you down and explain my business, and wong! she crowned me with that." He nodded at a bronze statue which lay on the carpet. It was modern and rough-hewn, a naked lady with unexpected bulges. It didn't look like Venus, but that was the name carved on the base. "You do really see stars," John Masson added—a fact which he thought might be of interest, since he was an intelligent young man.

Paul brought the brandy, and stood by, aware that this was an emergency.

The Countess, levitated by compassion, floated from the chair, poured a stiff drink and handed it to Masson, helped herself equally liberally, signed for the others to be served, and resumed her place all in one flowing movement surprising in one so stout.

"I need it," said Masson, drinking deep and giving a gasp.

"Me, too," said the Countess. She did the same, without the gasp.

"And when I came to, I was as you found me, and handcuffed with my own bracelets." He swirled what was left of the brandy and brooded on it darkly. "My own bracelets," he repeated. That was a bitter pill. "I could feel the yacht was at sea, but there was Fanny Adams I could do about it. She made a clean getaway?" There was no hope in the question; it was more a statement of fact.

They confirmed it, and gave him the details.

"You're not her brother at all?" the Countess marvelled.

"Her brother? I'd rather have a scorpion for a sister."

"So she even told fibs," sighed the Countess. She signed to Paul, and took another drink. "And she did seem such a nice girl."

"What time is it now?"

"About eleven."

"Hell," said Masson. "That gives her the devil of a start. And with all that dough to pay her way. She'll have caught a plane to anywhere."

"She had a lot of jewels," Dr. John pointed out. "Customs and so on?"

"She'd be smart enough to plant them. She's smart enough for anything, dammit."

"What I can't make out," said the Countess, "is why Scotland Yard should be bothered about an ordinary, quiet little girl like Mary Jane."

The man from the Yard laughed, but it wasn't a happy laugh. It was a bitter and savage and angry sound.

"Your Mary Jane is Arsenic Agatha. She's poison. You're lucky to be alive, Countess."

"Oh, dear!" said the Countess.

Dr. John swung about, small hands held out.

"I hate to have to say it, but, with the future and your welfare in mind, I am bound in duty to point out, Hilda, I told you so."

"You did, dear Dr. John," the Countess admitted. "I am an old fool. I shall take your advice from now on. I do seem to be an extraordinarily bad judge of character."

"Not always," said Dr. John. "You trust me, Hilda."

"Oh, indeed, yes," said the Countess. "Do you really mean, Mr.—er—Scotland Yard that Mary Jane meant me any harm?"

"I wouldn't know, but I could make a guess. You see, she specialized in jobs looking after elderly people with money. She was a companion to an old lady who died. Well, old ladies die, and no one thought anything of that, and it was nice of the old lady to remember the companion in her will. So often they don't. The same thing happened with another old lady. Then she looked after an old gentleman, too. She was cut out for that kind of work. Everything was in her favour—appearance, manners and so on."

"Yes," the Countess agreed, "that's very true."

"The village doctor, who'd been treating the old gentleman for his heart, gave a death certificate. The will was all in order, and showed how much Agatha's services had been appreciated. Everything was in order, until a sister of the deceased gentleman, out of spite because she'd been cut off

without a penny, got an exhumation order. The old gentleman was full of arsenic. I have here," he tapped his coat, "a warrant for the arrest of Agatha Smayle on a charge of murder."

"Agatha Smayle?" said the Countess.

"Have it your way," sighed the man from the Yard, "Mary Jane."

"Oh, dear!" said the Countess, and held out her glass to Paul.

"You see, Hilda?" said Dr. John. "Yet you wouldn't listen to me."

"I should have. I realize that now. How wicked people are! Fancy killing the old gentleman like that! Why ever didn't you arrest her straight away?"

"She didn't loiter about. We traced her to Soho, and lost her. One of the local characters had fallen for Agatha's line—she was probably a bishop's daughter or something in Soho—and he smuggled her out. A Wop of some kind he was, of course."

"This Wop," said Dr. John, with sudden interest, "what was his name?"

"He had more names than there are in the telephone book," Masson said, and paused. "But he was generally known as Bingo. Name mean anything to you?" He had no need for a verbal answer. The frozen silence was enough. "I thought so," he said. "I was coming to Bingo. We had the tip he'd got away in the *Stormalong*. I suppose he beat it with her?"

Dr. John's chuckle was quiet but it sounded loud in the hush.

"No," he said dryly, "Bingo went before."

"Meaning?"

The Countess wiped her eyes.

"Poor Bingo was murdered," she said. "He was my husband."

The young man from Scotland Yard looked as if he had been hit on the head again. Simon knew how he felt. He was discovering, like the French detective who wasn't a detective, that things aboard the *Stormalong* were complex.

"I beg your pardon," he said, and mechanically held out his glass to Paul for badly needed stimulant.

"The Count was murdered at sea," Dr. John explained.

"Or rather he vanished, and we assumed he'd been murdered. It's been a great puzzle to all of us. We've been wondering which of us did it."

Masson smiled in a dazed way.

"I can understand that," he said. "Murder isn't a thing one just forgets."

"We were nearly forgetting it," said the Countess. "You know how it is—life wags on. And really the whole business seemed quite beyond us. The only sensible way was to give it up. You know—like a *Times* crossword. Do you think you've hit on the answer?"

The detective-sergeant put his glass on the floor with the firmness of one who knows he has had more than enough. He shook his head, as if to clear it, rested his hands on his knees, and looked from one to the other in a helpless way. He didn't speak for quite a long time.

"Who's crazy here?" he asked, then.

"They say I am," said the Countess.

Masson didn't dispute that, but it didn't really help him with his main problem.

"You say Bingo was murdered, and you were all quite puzzled about who'd done it?"

"Very naturally, I suggest," said Dr. John.

"It would have been too dumb of us not to be," the Countess pointed out.

"Quite! Quite!" Masson's polite acceptance held a lot of irony. "You say he was your husband, Countess?"

"If he wasn't," said the Countess, whose eyes were sparkling now after a lot of brandy, "I've been living in sin." She gave her sudden, deep, man's laugh.

"There's that." Masson held out his hand, lost in thought, and Dr. John gave him another cigarette and lit it for him. "Of course, she did it, if it's any further interest to you," the man from Scotland Yard went on. "She had every possible motive. He'd worked her in here, he knew who she was, and whilst he was on the scene she couldn't really get busy on you, Countess."

"Poor Bingo!" said the Countess. "He was quite a darling in many ways. And so clever. But it seems he was too clever

this time. That's why I like you, Peter. You don't pretend to be smart."

"And you, sir, are—?"

Simon didn't have to lie.

"Of course, you haven't met any of us yet, Mr. Er," said the Countess. "This is my son, Peter, by, of course, an earlier marriage, and this is my friend and medical adviser, Dr. John."

They exchanged nods.

"Well, all I can say is, Countess, that you seem to attract crooks as a magnet does pins." His glance rested on Dr. John as he spoke, but it had to rest somewhere. "You've had a lucky break even though you've lost some jewellery, and that, I suppose, is insured."

"I don't really know, Mr. Er, but I suppose it must be. It's the one really cheerful point about the whole business."

"There is another, Countess—the fact that you're alive. Bingo or Arsenic Agatha would have got you for sure, and now, as it were, they've cancelled each other out."

The Countess clapped her hands and her rings sparkled.

"Isn't that a nice way of putting it, Mr. Er?" she said. "I can't tell you how glad I am that you chanced along, or how sorry I am about your lousy luck in getting dinged on the head. You really have cleared the air quite considerably. I suppose you'll be going ashore in Toulon?"

"I will, and as fast as my legs'll carry me. I've got a lot of lost ground to make up."

"Then before we get there," said the Countess, "be a darling and explain about Wilson."

"Wilson?"

"Our late steward. Paul, here, has taken his place."

"Was he murdered, too?" asked the detective-sergeant by way of a little joke.

"Yes," said the Countess.

"How many murders have you enjoyed on this yacht?" Masson asked, when he had recovered. He spoke lightly, but that was only because he didn't dare to be serious.

"Only two," said the Countess.

"And it looks very much as if your girl friend was responsible for both," said Dr. John. "The way it's all coming out would make you think of the mills of God, that is if you

happened to believe in the mills of God. You see, once again she had every motive."

"How come?"

"The late lamented Wilson was much more than a perfect steward. He was a man of character, charm and distinguished appearance. He was a friend rather than a mere servant. So much so that he proposed marriage to the Countess recently."

The detective-sergeant passed his hand across his eyes, but he had stopped looking startled. It seemed to Simon that he was settling down better to life aboard the *Stormalong*.

"And—?"

"The following night he vanished just as the Count had. You see?"

"Did Agatha know of this?"

"Oh, yes, naturally," said the Countess. "She was quite in my confidence, dear child. For one so young she was surprisingly wise. I turned to her at once for advice."

"And what did she say?"

"She was against it. I'm afraid I can be a rather stubborn old woman at times. That a chit of a girl should call poor, darling Wilson a double-crossing old viper—well, Mr. Er, you'll understand that, if anything, swayed me towards him. You know what a woman's heart is. Mind, I think she meant well—she may even have been right. I've quite given up trying to judge people. However, right or wrong, it doesn't matter now. He's gone and she's gone, and that's all over and done with." She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Wilson would have been just as much in the way as the Count," Dr. John pointed out.

"Thanks, doc," said the young man with a brief grin, "I should never have thought of that."

"Dr. John thinks of everything," the Countess said proudly.

"You're telling me," said Masson, and again his glance rested on the bat of a man—it might have been in respect and admiration. "So that's all the murders and robberies with violence and etcetera you've had up to date?"

"Don't you think it's enough?" laughed the Countess gaily.

"Plenty!" For some reason the simple word had quite an ominous ring. "Well," he said, "so long as I can catch Agatha she'll be for it. A couple of extra murders mean nothing in

her young life. Perhaps that's just as well." He stood up, still a little stiffly, and stubbed out his cigarette. "I should hate to get you people involved."

"And we'd hate it, too," cried the Countess, stumbling somewhat over her words. "Dirty linen always looks so bad—beashly. You're a ver' kind young man."

"It's not that so much," said Masson. "I'm looking at it from my own point of view. Any judge or jury will find the prisoner guilty, but they'd also find the Crown witnesses insane, and that would be embarrassing." He smiled at them all, through his bloodstains, which gave a peculiar effect. "How soon shall we be in Toulon?"

"I'll slip up and ask the Captain," Dr. John volunteered immediately.

"Don't bother," said Detective-Sergeant Masson. "I'll go myself. I want a word with him anyway. Whose pal is he?"

"His own," said Dr. John, his parchment brow creasing in a frown.

"Oh, and mine!" cried the Countess, "Dear Captain Pam!"

"And yours, sir?" Masson asked Simon.

Simon's smile announced that no one was his enemy.

The man from Scotland Yard paused a second and subjected Simon to a sharp scrutiny. He seemed surprised to find him aboard the yacht *Stormalong*; he seemed puzzled.

"You haven't said much," he remarked.

"I seldom do," said Simon. "It's far too much fun listening."

"You may find it fun," Masson said. "I haven't. I feel as if I was still knocked out and dreaming. If I were you—" He broke off suddenly, remembering he'd a tricky murder hunt on his hands and that was enough. He gave Simon a grin. "Look after yourself, mate," he said. "A good thing Arsenic Agatha didn't go gunning for you as well. No harm meant, but you look a sitting shot. Well, I'll be seeing you all."

He left them.

"Goddam," said the Countess. "If I never see another flamin' dick as long as I live it'll be time enough. Get me to bed, dear boys, will you? I really feel all in."

She looked it. The night had been a strain and the brandy had done its work. At least she would sleep. In fact, she was almost asleep already.

"Such a pity your dear mother drinks," Dr. John confided, and gave Simon a droll wink.

Together they helped her to her suite. She was ready for bed in every sense, for beneath her black boudoir-robe she wore a black nightgown in mourning for Wilson. They rolled her between the sheets, turned off the light, and followed by a rising theme of snores, left the poor, much-wronged lady to the peace of sleep.

"No sedative needed, you see," said Dr. John.

"I'm glad," said Simon. A few drinks didn't matter, but drugs were different.

"Let's have a last noggin," said Dr. John, "I feel we've earned it."

They went to the saloon and Paul served them. When they were alone, Dr. John lit a cigarette, and pondered a while.

"Well, my dear boy," he said, "that clears up the mysteries of the Count and Wilson. We can let the dead past bury its dead. Whether she killed them or not, Mary Jane, by her record, has made herself the perfect whipping-girl, the scapegoat. Give a bitch a bad name and then hang her. I wish I could have avoided that young fellow having any words with Captain Pam, but, of course, even if I'd stopped him then they'd have talked later. It's a great pity that dear Captain Pam has to know, so that I can no longer hold the threat of exposure over him."

"It cuts both ways," said Simon, whose tongue was a little loosened by now. "He can't hold it over you either."

Dr. John chuckled delight.

"You're rather a sobersides, Peter," he said, "and as a result when you do make a joke it seems much more amusing. But, speaking seriously, we now have the Countess just where we want her—you and I—so long as we stand together. It's the greatest bit of luck, if you happen to believe in luck."

"Did you get anything out of those two at Marseilles?" Simon asked.

"Those two? Oh, you mean, Sir Mark and Detective Mayol?" His bat's face was quite empty. "Dear me, no," he said. "I tried to, of course, but those official people are always as mum as oysters."

Simon nodded. He didn't mind. He wouldn't have asked, but for the brandy. Questions were always a waste of time.

"When I think of my valuables, when I think what she might have done to poor, dear Hilda, I hope that young man catches her and in double quick time." Dr. John spoke with venom, showing sharp teeth. He drained his glass. "On the other hand one might say that out of evil cometh good, if one chanced to believe in Good and Evil. I must go and wash. Toulon is a naval base, and we must appear professional, eh, my dear boy?"

Simon agreed, and went to his own room. On the pillow lay an envelope addressed to Peter Mountford. It was a long time since anyone had written to him. He opened it with interest, and read:

"Darling Simon—To know all is to forgive all. You won't think hardly of a working girl who's had to fight all her own battles. A pity things went wrong. This time I intended to go straight. My idea was to marry you and then you and I would have been sitting pretty with the Countess, and we could have got all the others out of the way in no time. But the past caught up on me, and all the pretty house of cards came tumbling down. Such a shame! We could have been so happy.

In haste,

Mary Jane.

P.S. I shall always love you."

Simon stood looking at the letter for a long time. Previously she'd always called him Peter. He didn't like very much the phrase about getting all the others out of the way, and even if he hadn't been married already he would never have married Mary Jane. No wonder she had fainted when she'd thought they'd got rid of the French detective. That interview must have been a strain. There was one bit of mischief in which she hadn't been concerned. No telling about the others.

He wondered where prim Mary Jane was now out in the wide world.

III

Toulon, with all its troublesome people and their tiresome questions, lay astern, and the *Stormalong* sailed once more on seas of summer, white and graceful as a swan. The passengers on an Orient liner heading in to Villefranche looked down at her enviously, thinking how placid and serene life must be when you were lucky enough to own such a perfect toy.

It was late afternoon, and the world was blue and gold. The coast still unwound to port, wooded and undulating, spangled with the confetti of villas. Cars and coaches crawled along the three roads which were ruled along the hills—one by the shore, the second midway and the third near the crests. From the sea the Riviera looked like a pretty mechanical toy-model of itself.

Simon stood at the wheel, enjoying the easy task of steering. Spike kept him company. Spike had been silent for a time, smoking a cigarette, lost in his own thoughts. Suddenly he spoke.

"No harm in spilling the beans now, Simon, seeing Mary Jane has had it so far as we're concerned."

"What beans?" asked Simon, as was required of him.

"About her and me. You remember I asked you if you were going to get off with her? Well, I was glad when you said you weren't, because I suppose you could have cut me out, being the owner's so-called son and all. I didn't fancy the idea, but I was prepared to be a sport, seeing I like you and there wasn't much I could have done if you intended to butt in. Mary Jane and I were pretty good pals on the quiet." He gave a big wink. "You can't beat those little mimby-pimby ones for being hard-cases, though I must admit she took me in properly, and I never guessed for a moment she was quite the hard case she's turned out to be. Proper fly, she was. I thought apart from being all in favour of a bit of necking, she was as straight as a die. It needs a good 'un to take me in, but Mary Jane certainly did."

"You weren't alone," said Simon consolingly.

"And here we come to Monte Carlo, and there's no Mary Jane."

"What's Monte Carlo got to do with it?"

"Nothing now, but it would have had plenty, if Mary Jane hadn't got pinched—or nearly. She and I were going to pull a fast one at Monte."

"Were you?"

"You betcher. We had it all doped out. I picked up enough navigation during the war to handle the *Stormalong* in waters like these. I could at least have got her down to Rome or something of that sort. Mary Jane was all for the Countess, y'know, although she was playing her own game. Like the rest of them she wanted to have her on her own. Her scheme was to get Dr. John, the Cap and you ashore, and then the hell with you. We were going to beat it with the yacht and the Countess."

"You were going to leave me behind, too?" said Simon. He was not reproachful, just interested.

"It was kinder than murdering you, like the others will when they're ready," Spike reasoned. "We didn't like having to do it, but it seemed unavoidable. A clean sweep, see? So's we could make a fresh start. You would have been in the way. We argued all that out. However, it doesn't matter now. No Mary Jane. A pity—and yet come to think of it, seeing Mary Jane's past, perhaps it's just as well. Suppose she'd got the old dame round to making a will, what would have happened then?"

"I don't know."

"Arsenic Agatha!" said Spike. "Lumme, did she make a goat out of me! Still, she did me a good turn without meaning to. Whether I killed the Count or not, she's got the credit now for good and all. That's a comfortable feeling. You never know when a thing like that may blow up again. It won't now, never."

Captain Pamphillion breezed in.

"Professionals had better take over, Peter," he said. "We're just coming in to Monaco. You've done well, my boy. Proud to see you haven't been carving your initials with the wake."

Simon stepped out on deck. Another fine shot in the technicolour film of life. The *Stormalong*'s bow turned, and there ahead was the entrance to a little harbour held within the white arms of a concrete breakwater. The opening in the wall

was flanked on either side by miniature lighthouses. On a high cliff to the left was a big white building and an old palace with brown battlements. Ahead lay a little closely-packed bright and clean town. To starboard Monte Carlo climbed the hills, looking as if it were painted on canvas. The casino rose, a more modern palace on its own bluff. Speed-boats were darting about, towing water-skiers, just as you saw them at the Regal in Blickington. Other yachts lay inside. He gazed at it all with great satisfaction. It was a kind of fairyland scene, very remote from Royals Bottom, very superior to the holiday camp at Jersey.

IV

Simon had never been in any place a quarter as fine, colourful and romantic as the Summer Sporting Club. It dazzled and delighted him. Everything was luxurious and gay. There was soft music and soft carpets; people dined and danced and gambled and drank. They all seemed to be very rich and very carefree. The dark Mediterranean lapped below. Wearing a white dinner suit and a soft dress shirt loaned to him by the obliging Captain Pam he looked a very different person from Simple Simon of The Pheasant, though, of course, he remained the same inside.

The place had been a favourite haunt of the Countess and Bingo during their brief but ardent courtship. His mother had shed a few tears over that dear ghost which, she said, haunted every corner, and then, her spirits restored by a noble flood of champagne cocktails, she and her party made their way to the roulette tables. Attendants greeted her with proper respect, and found places immediately. Her gown was a striking creation in baby blue, and a hairdresser had visited the yacht and cooked up the sausage curls in new gold. Her jewellery, naturally, was not what it would have been before Mary Jane's departure, but she still had her rings and diamond necklace which she'd been wearing that afternoon. Had Mary Jane taken everything it would not have affected her welcome. She was obviously a patron any casino would be happy and proud to entertain.

"Are you going to play, darling?" she asked.

"No, thanks, mother," said Simon. "I'll have enough fun looking on."

"Dear, wise boy," said the Countess. "Gambling is a curse. Worse than coffee. How proud your dear father would be!"

Dolls-eyes eager in their frames of spiky lashes, she started to play, and her darling son was quite forgotten.

Simon didn't bother to sit down but stood behind the Countess, who was flanked by Dr. John and Captain Pamphillion.

Despite the warmth of the greeting extended to her it soon became evident that the Summer Sporting was not going to find her a profitable customer. Simon, though not a gambler himself, had to chuckle quietly. Money called to money, and if, as everybody said, his mother had a magnetic attraction for crooks, she drew wealth to her with even greater ease. Obviously she had no system, no charms, no superstitions, no special lucky numbers. Hers wasn't a grim battle with Chance. She only had to stake a lot of counters on one of the squares on the green cloth, and the little ivory ball went running round and round and popped into the appropriate slot in the wheel as if it had no choice.

Dr. John and Captain Pam, to their chagrin, were not allowed to bet on her selected number. If they wanted to follow her they could only play on combinations, colours and so on which involved her choice. Though their odds were lower as a result, they won with delightful regularity. Of course, she couldn't control the general public. The minute she made her bet the number was smothered at both ends of the table. If she changed her mind on a last minute hunch, all the other gamblers followed her.

An interested and excited crowd gathered.

The bank occasionally had thirty-six numbers running for it, but that seldom made any difference.

Simon had always imagined that croupiers and gamblers were grim, intent people. He had been led to believe that the nights of Monte Carlo were noisy with the revolver shots of suicides. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The more fortunate his mother was the happier everyone seemed to be, including the croupiers whom she tipped lavishly. A

good time was being had by all. In the mild gambling at The Pheasant you took each other's money, and that wasn't much fun for the losers, but here the winnings came out of an inexhaustible well provided by the generous proprietors. It seemed to Simon a very pleasant way of making money, and he wondered why anybody worked on the Riviera.

On those occasions when she did lose, the Countess was hurt and aggrieved, like a baby whose rattle has fallen out of the pram.

"Oh, dear," she'd say, "isn't that too bad? I should have followed my intuition. I knew that was going to turn up, Damnation!"

And everybody would murmur sympathy, particularly as her downfall meant that their stakes also were raked away.

"Hullo, Simon," said a voice. "It's Elise."

The voice was as sweet as honey, and Simon seemed to have heard that pretty name quite recently though he could not place where.

He turned about and found himself looking down at a girl who was a flame. She burned below him in a wisp of scarlet evening frock, small, eager, and full of throbbing light. Her eyes were blacker than his, her smooth hair blacker. Her eyes had sparks in their depths. A strange thing happened to Simon who was usually so placid. For a breath all the glitter of the Summer Sporting vanished away and he was gazing into the depths of a campfire which glowed in a forest of pines.

"Yes," she said, "you're Simon all right."

"Yes," said Simon. "And you're Elise. I can see that, and yet—?"

With small brown hands Elise made an amazingly graphic gesture beneath her chin. As though she had drawn it for him Simon saw a black spade beard.

"Detective Mayol! Sir Mark!"

"Were those the names they used? What fun!"

"You're Elise, the heiress they were going to marry me to."

"I'm Elise, the heiress—full stop," she laughed. "The cheek of those two comedians! What do they think I am? Still they earned some honest money when they tipped me off that it would be worth looking you up here to-night."

"You paid them?"

"The woman always pays, especially if she's an heiress. Especially on the Riviera. Roulette doesn't interest you, Simon?"

"No," said Simon, for it certainly didn't now. "It seems an easy way of making money, but I don't need money."

Elise was quite delighted by this simple and truthful remark.

"Isn't that lovely?" she said. "Most men in these parts need money more than anything."

Simon smiled at her joke, for everybody in the Summer Sporting was obviously very rich.

"Your mother doesn't seem to share your contempt for the stuff," Elise said. It was odd to be talking to an utter stranger who knew so much. From the way she spoke Elise obviously knew all about their peculiar relationship. But then Detective Mayol and Sir Mark could have supplied all that information in Marseilles. "She'll play here all night, and you're only in the way. Shall I take you off her hands?"

"Please," said Simon.

"You're off her hands, and here we go," said Elise.

Although she was an heiress and much the grandest girl Simon had ever spoken to, there was nothing grand about her talk and manners. She was easy and informal, as if they had known each other for ages, and any girl at Royals Bottom would have put on more style and airs. But, Simon realized, Elise had no need to be anything but herself. She had wealth and flashing beauty; she was a princess who was above the rules which governed ordinary people; she lived in a magical world where anything could happen if she merely made a wish.

Having accepted all this in that first moment, Simon was quite at ease. Nothing in his past experience had prepared him for Elise, but that didn't matter. He needed no preparation, no experience, since he only had to go on being Simple Simon Smith—as ever all he could be.

"Imagine Elise chancing on something she wants and doesn't have to buy," she went on, so lightly, as if in all she said she mocked herself a little and found that fun too. "Don't you think it's a bit of luck, Simon?"

"Yes, Elise," said Simon in his brief way, but his voice and eyes were eloquent enough for anything.

"Just for the devil of it, and to prove our luck, throw this on any number you fancy."

She handed him a wad of notes from her jewelled bag, and Simon, as obliging as ever, tossed it carelessly on seventeen. The Countess fancied thirty-three, and so did all her retinue. The ball ran its hurrying course, and popped eagerly into seventeen. The Countess lamented, engrossed in her own fortunes, oblivious to all else.

The pile of wealth was pushed across to Elise, who bundled it carelessly together, and tossed a big piece to the croupier who was regarding her with amorous squirrel eyes. A flunkey appeared from nowhere. She tumbled the counters into his hands with a brief order in French.

"You see, Simon," Elise rejoiced. "We're even luckier than your dear mother who has only money and a thirst and you for a son. Who'd want you for a *son*? What a waste! Isn't it lovely to be rich, and able to buy anything—even money? If our night had depended on that spin, thirty-three would have come up. As things are, your boy friends are paid for all their trouble and there's a profit of lord knows what. Whilst the chips are cashed let's have a drink. You do drink, I hope, Simon?"

"I'm dry as a bone," said Simon.

"You dear Greek god to be so human."

"I'm very human," said Simon.

"I know," said Elise. "And that's nice, but you have a rather olympian calm you know. Or have you forgotten Olympus?"

"I've never been there."

"Oh, yes, you have, but perhaps it's as well you don't remember. I'm no goddess, or if I am it must be one of those disreputable ones they name nasty things after. What I'm really getting at is that you're a serene customer. Here you are, being kidnapped by Elise—the Elise—and you take it all as if it were the most natural thing in the world."

"Because it's you, Elise, it seems just that," said Simon.

"Dear Simon," she laughed fondly. "It's your doing really. You're the most natural creature in all creation."

The white-coated, sleek-haired barman flashed his special smile for Elise, and greeted her with affectionate homage. Briefly she was bewitchingly polite as she ordered the drinks,

and then he ceased to exist. In that crowded, brilliant place Simon found she had the power to build a wall round them which shut out everyone and everything else. He didn't bother wondering how she did so. He had never felt less inclined to bother. The fact remained.

"How have you managed to stay you in this crazy, sophisticated world, Simon?" she asked, her eyes glowing above the golden bubbles in her glass.

"This isn't my world, Elise," he said. "It's all new to me."

"You don't mean to say you've ever had to live in a world that was horribly sane and sober and proper and narrow, Simon?"

"All my life until a week or so back."

"Poor sweet, that makes you more wonderful, even though it explains a lot!" cried Elise. "What a crime! What a waste! You should have been a poacher, a vagabond, a gypsy. You should have been Casanova, Cellini. All those years—! What a ton of lost time to make up! I think I'm going to be a bit of help there. Simon, what do you think of me?"

Simon naturally told her what he had thought the moment he set eyes on her.

"You are my campfire burning deep among the dark pine-trees," he said, quite simply.

"Gosh!" said Elise, surprised, delighted, quite taken aback. "They said you were a peasant type who had what it takes. They didn't mention you were quite a poet. Do you often talk like that?"

"Only when I mean it."

"It's not just something you read in a book?"

"I don't read books, Elise."

"Thank God! So I'm that to you, and you made it up yourself?"

Simon shook his head.

"I didn't make it up," he said. "I couldn't have. I'm no good at that kind of thing. You did it, just by saying, 'It's Elise.' "

Elise considered him anew with her black eyes which were flecked deep down with light. Thinking aloud, she made some comment in French. It sounded beautiful, whatever it was. Her voice was cool and yet richly warm, like the whisper of

the Mediterranean on the shingle of the beach. The man came back with the money, and without looking at it at all, Elise paid him and the barman and dropped the remainder into her bag. There were bows and grateful murmurs. None of this outside business intruded. They remained behind the invisible wall.

"Come on, my beloved Simple Simon," said Elise, most sweetly. "Let's get weaving."

Simon had to smile at someone so beautiful, who spoke so beautifully, using familiar slang like that. It would have made him feel most at home if he hadn't felt so utterly at home already.

They went out of the Summer Sporting into the violet night. Elise didn't have to give any orders. She slipped her arm through his and they waited on the marble steps. A cream Rolls-Royce swept up, and a magnificent figure in uniform opened the door. They stepped in. No such car had ever stopped at The Pheasant. It was more like a room aboard the *Stormalong* and it sailed on its way as easily as the yacht. Simon didn't have to wonder what his next move was now that they were really alone. Elise sat back in her corner, so he sat back in his. She seemed very happy, and sang a little song to herself. It was probably French. It lilted and danced along. Even when the car was in darkness he still seemed to see her eyes, and when lights flooded in her red, full lips were smiling, and her glance rested on him with complete approval. There was quite a space between them, but he felt as if Elise were sitting on his lap.

The Rolls took them fast and far, meeting other cars which charged at them down the wrong side of the road with glaring eyes, lighting up red cliffs. Sometimes dark country, sometimes the glitter of towns. And Elise sang her little song.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

SIMON stepped from the Rolls on to the clean, white dock, and the splendid but blank-faced chauffeur closed the door, saluted, climbed back into his seat, and drove away. The sight of the *Stormalong* moored there gave a happy sense of homecoming. Some might have found the world of the yacht a trifle bizarre and fantastic—even dangerous—but to Simon, after the world in which he had spent two nights of fire and fireflies and stars, and one golden sun-drenched day, the *Stormalong* at that moment seemed much like a tranquil and even humdrum village—a more compact Royals Bottom afloat. In matters of fantasy and thrills he had acquired new standards.

In spite of everything, good to be home again. A cool breeze blew from the shining expanse of the Mediterranean, crowding the little harbour with wavelets. Brass sparkled on the smart yachts, none of which was smarter than his own *Stormalong*, so familiar, his gay caravan. Soon now they would be moving on—a thought to please a gypsy.

And, so rightly, his mother sat in the stern to welcome the returned prodigal. She waved a joyful greeting, rings sparkling signals of love. Simon waved back.

“Hullo, mother!” he called, and the warmth in his greeting must have gladdened her heart.

He strode down the gangway and along the deck, and stooping from his height kissed her on the brow. She patted him affectionately; she hugged him in her fat, dimpled arms.

“Oh, it’s nice to have you back, Peter,” she said. “Now sit down and tell me all about it. Have you had a wonderful time?”

“Wonderful, mother, is just the word,” said Simon, and his

dark eyes were dreamy.

"What a nice car they sent you back in! It reminds me of one Bingo and I hired for our honeymoon. I was really quite delighted when dear Sir Mark told me at the Sporting that the diplomatic people had whisked you away for a while to see the beauty of the Riviera. You enjoyed all the beauty, I hope, dear boy?"

"Oh, yes, mother," said Simon warmly. "Every bit."

"So nice of them, and as Sir Mark pointed out quite a tribute to us both. But, Peter, how did you manage for clothes?"

"I didn't need any," said Simon.

"So they contrived to arrange even that!" said the Countess. "People may mock our British officials, but if they want to do their stuff they're not so dumb. You're always such a picture of health, dear boy, that I suppose it's more noticeable, but you look a wee bit fagged."

"There was a lot to see and do, mother."

"I hope it wasn't too stuffy and formal, darling? These official shows often are. And after all, you're only a boy still. Did they find you a nice girl?"

"Yes, mother."

"Nothing serious, I hope, Peter?" said the Countess playfully, tapping his arm with her cigarette-holder. "You're not involved? No question of anything permanent? Marriage for instance?"

"No, mother," said Simon.

"All quite harmless and innocent?"

"That's the way it seemed to me," said Simon.

"How nice of them! You're such a dear babe, that I should hate to think of you at the mercy of some of those sophisticated creatures who swarm round here in droves."

"She wasn't the sort of girl you find in droves, mother. Did you go on winning?"

"Oh, yes, darling," the Countess rejoiced. "Oodles and oodles and buckets and buckets. I simply don't know how much, or if I did know I've forgotten. I stayed on both nights until the tables packed up. I felt I had to. After all, I was working for you in a way. The richer I am, the richer you'll be some day. Isn't it nice to think that?"

"Yes, mother."

The Countess looked suddenly wistful.

"But you wouldn't push me overboard, would you, darling?"

"Never, mother!"

"Sweet!" said the Countess fondly, and for a time they talked of other things, including Persian cats, French poodles and tropical butterflies. Simon found his mother's inconsequential conversation very restful. She had many interests, and none of them was intense and concentrated and fierce like a spark of fire.

In due course they were back at gambling.

"I think I should stick to roulette," said the Countess. "That is a game we can afford. I never seem to have much luck at the gee-gees. Dear Sir Mark's been so helpful and gone to ever so much trouble, but we're a couple of hundred pounds down the drain as a result. He put it on a certainty at the Nice races yesterday, but unfortunately the certainty finished last. He was most upset, poor dear fellow. However, he's having another flutter for me to-day, if he hears of anything good. I gave him the stake just on the chance. He'll be along presently to tell us how we've got on. I do hope we've won. I hate losing for your sake, Peter. It's all very well for a silly old woman, but you're young and have the future to think of." She sighed. "The future? I wonder how much there is of that for me? Sometimes I feel—very little! I suppose it's my liver. I do miss Mary Jane's pummellings. No word of the dear girl. I did hope everything would be cleared up here, and she'd have been found suffering from loss of memory, and we could have gone on just where we left off, with no ill-feelings on either side."

"Are you getting a new companion, mother?"

"Well, no, Peter, that's been a bit of a struggle. Unless I can have my Mary Jane I don't want to have this one or that one simply because they're so efficient and marvellous. I don't think I really like people who are efficient and marvellous. They're so bossy, and they make one feel silly. I'm rather like you, Peter—I prefer life to run along smoothly like a brook. Brooks are very soothing things, Peter . . ."

They talked of brooks and other waterways.

"Mind, Peter," said the Countess, "I think I should have had to send for one or the other, but fortunately those two dear fellows, Dr. John and Captain Pam, were so eager to do the best for me that each insisted his own candidate was the only possible choice. As neither would give way, in the end each agreed that nobody would be better than the other's, and so it all came to nothing, thank goodness. I find Paul looks after me quite well enough, and is the essence of tact and understanding, but you needn't be afraid of me falling in love with him as I did with dear Wilson, even though he's younger and better looking. Talking of Wilson, I had another proposal of marriage this morning, Peter."

"Did you, mother?" asked Simon, interested. Yes, it was cosy to be home again, gossiping, hearing all the news. No matter where he roved something of the villager blended with the gypsy in Simon.

"Dear Sir Mark," said the Countess, fondly and with a certain pride. "If I fancied him as your stepfather, would you push him over like you did poor Wilson, Peter?"

"I don't know, mother," said Simon.

"Then you needn't worry your sweet head," said his mother, lighting another of her pretty cigarettes. "For I won't keep you in suspense. I turned him down. Perhaps it was my liver again, or the late sitting at the Sporting, but I felt grumpy and finicky." She held up her hand. "Oh, not a word against your friend, Peter dear. A very perfect gentle knight, but it seemed to me just a shade too perfect and too much the gent for me. Anybody who'd adored Bingo as I did, would be certain to find Sir Mark's goodness tiresome after a time. Your father was very much Sir Mark's type but bluffer and more hearty and not so very gentlemanly. 'I'm no diplomat,' your poor father often said. Well, of course, Sir Mark is. I think I really did the chivalrous fellow a real service. I could never have made him a good wife—I couldn't help his career. That career, which means all the world to him, would be a crashing bore to me. Formal shows, etiquette, curtsying. Not my line of country, Peter. It says a lot for the depth of his feelings, dear, that he offered to fling it all up for my sake, but I wouldn't hear of that, of course. He'd be like a fish out

of water just as a poodlefaker. I think far too highly of him to smash his life. I remember . . .”

The Countess recalled at some length wealthy women of her acquaintance who had ruined men in marriage.

“I think Detective Mayol was disappointed for his friend’s sake, but then he’s only a glorified policeman after all, and he can’t be expected to understand a woman’s feelings.”

“Has he been here, too?”

“Oh, yes,” said the Countess. “He came along for drinks, and to commiserate about the Mary Jane business. It seems he would have arrested her in Marseilles, but held his hand because he saw how fond I was of her and the dear fellow hoped she was going straight at last. Trust a Frenchman to be twisted round a woman’s finger. She had very fine eyes, had Mary Jane, when she took her glasses off. She looked quite a different person, like the stars do on the pictures when they’ve been ugly secretaries. I must say Inspector Mayol has been very helpful.” The Countess paused and smiled knowingly at Simon. “You’re very precious to me, Peter,” she resumed, “and I didn’t want you wandering about quite unprotected. That’s where dear Mayol came in. For a relatively small fee he was able to arrange for two of his men to keep an eye on you. He guaranteed you’d never know, and I’ll bet you didn’t, but day and night they saw your every move.”

“Did they, mother?” said Simon, suitably impressed.

“I hope you don’t mind, dear boy?”

“Oh, no,” said Simon with conviction. The money didn’t matter and Mayol and Sir Mark had proved good friends to him.

“Just a mother’s whim,” said the Countess, “and I knew you wouldn’t be up to any mischief. Ah, here comes Sir Mark. I wonder how the luck’s been?”

Although Simon wasn’t clever, he knew the answer, but, kindly, he didn’t say a word.

Sir Mark was descending from a small open carriage, which seemed an appropriate vehicle for his distinguished if rather old-world figure. The fact that he wore a light grey suit and hat and had race-glasses on his shoulder did not change his appearance of official dignity.

“Of course, not a word about his proposal, Peter,” said the

Countess needlessly. "And nothing about our new passengers either."

"New passengers?"

"I'd forgotten. You don't know, darling. Dr. John and Captain Pam have arranged for us to do a little errand of mercy as we wander on. It's all most honourable and worthy, but I believe the authorities mightn't understand. Red-tape and so on. Such a nuisance. Anyway, they both said I was to keep it under my hat, and they must have good reasons. I'll tell you later, when we're rid of our dreary old gentleman."

Simon was a little surprised to hear this news, but he did not trouble himself with conjectures. When the new passengers appeared he would see them, and that there should be something mysterious about them was only natural, since they were to travel in the *Stormalong*.

Sir Mark joined them.

"Dear lady," he said, bending over the Countess's hand but without going so far as to kiss it in a foreign way. "Peter!"

He was grave and stately, but his manners were a shade less formal than they had been at Marseilles. Obviously he accepted mother and son now as friends, and called in a social way. He took a chair gratefully.

"Races—exhaustin'!" he explained briefly, from behind his teeth and neat silver moustache, making it clear his sporting afternoon had been rather strenuous to one accustomed to a more quiet and well-ordered sphere.

"Did you have a good day, Sir Mark?"

He shook his head.

"Amazin'," he said. "Amazin'. With my friend, The Nabob—nickname, y'know—Maharajah of Mangalore, y'know. Told me—oldest friend—backed his filly Star of Ind for a couple of lakh of rupees. Not on course, naturally. Ruined the price. Seemed chance of lifetime. Naturally, plunged, myself and you, dear lady. Couldn't be beaten. Straight from The Nabob's mouth. Better than the horse's. Plunged. No time for place bets. Chance to make a killing. Put m'shirt on it. Delighted to be able to cut you in on best of things, dear lady. Live and learn. No such thing racecourse certainty. Star of

Ind beaten by a short head." He held out his hands to illustrate. "That much. A nose. Amazin'."

He sat back exhausted by this detailed report.

"Oh, dear," said the Countess. "I really should stick to the tables. I do believe if I hadn't been on it the good thing wouldn't have come unstuck."

Sir Mark gave a little shrug, too much of the gentleman to put the blame on a lady but unable to conceal his feeling that she might be right.

"Luck of the game," he said, bearing no malice, chivalrous in spite of his losses.

"You won't have tea, I know," said the Countess very firmly, "but I do think we need a drink. Peter, be a dear and ask Paul to bring whisky-and-soda. I think that will be best, don't you, Sir Mark?"

"Always," said Sir Mark. "British as flag."

Simon went amidships, found the steward and gave the order. As he returned on deck Spike stepped aboard.

"Hullo," said Spike. "Been watching them fishing. What do you think?—they eat octopuses here. Course I like a good plate of jellied eels, but octopuses: blimey!" He held his nose briefly. "You look as if you'd been on the razzle. Had a good time?"

"Fine, Spike."

"A dame again?"

"Yes," said Simon.

"Bet it didn't cost you nothin' neither."

"No," said Simon.

"You didn't run into Margot did you?"

"Not Margot."

"You're a bit of a marvel, Simon," Spike said. "Just as quiet in your own way as Mary Jane, and not a tenth as smart as me, and yet the dames drop into your lap like—like manna from heaven. You come back in that Rolls, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Hers?"

"Yes."

"Cor lummy," said Spike, "there's no doubt about you—you got the key of the game. And they tell me the girls here

cost the earth. Let alone with Rollses. I wished I knew how you did it, but I don't believe you know yourself."

"I don't," said Simon.

"That's just it," sighed Spike. "Comes natural. You're born that way. Heard the buzz about the new little lot of mischief? Crowd of skirts coming aboard. Some dirty work, I'll bet. Haven't got the real low-down yet, but if it's on the level I'll eat my hat. Simply couldn't be. Not in the *Stormalong*. What d'you know, Simon?"

"Not as much as you," said Simon.

"Pity you're here really," said Spike, but without malice. "Course no one else 'll get a look in. You'd better watch your step, all the same, or you may find yourself in the barrow. She may be your mother but I don't think the old dame would fancy her son making passes at bits, not in front of her eyes. Still, for all I know they may be coming along so's you can take your pick and get spliced up. I wouldn't be surprised at nothing."

"Nor me," said Simon.

"Well, it's a life," said Spike. "Going to take a kip. Sailing to-night and I've got the middle as usual. If I was you I'd do the same. You look to me as if the one thing you've been missing ashore is sleep."

Simon nodded and went aft. Sir Mark was putting something in his wallet, and the Countess was closing her bag. Simon didn't know whether his mother had taken another plunge on the morrow, or whether she had been recompensing her friend for the ill-fortune she had brought him by backing Star of Ind. It was of no consequence.

The Countess re-filled her glass, as usual without being aware of doing so, and she laughed gaily but fondly at Sir Mark.

"You are the most persistent man, my dear," she was saying, "but again I must say No!—and you must take No for an answer."

"Our paths will cross again, Hilda," said Sir Mark, "and I shall ask the same question, what? Man of few words, but mean all I say, damme."

Simon could sympathize with Sir Mark. He had as much to

gain as anyone by winning the hand of the Countess, even though he didn't fancy joining the yachting party.

Simon mixed himself a drink. For once he felt he needed it.

"Our fellahs do you well, Peter?" asked Sir Mark.

"Very," said Simon.

"Knew they would," said Sir Mark. "Told your mother so. Why, here's good old Mayol, what?"

The Chief of Detectives made his bow. His manner had changed also. He came now as an old acquaintance, and his eyes were not cold and searching. Simon looked quite fondly at the spade of black beard. It reminded him of Elise's graphic gesture, so much so that the imaginary beard of memory seemed more real than the beard itself.

"So the wanderer returns himself safely?" said Mayol, considering Simon with deep interest as if he were a peepshow, and by his tone reminding the Countess how much she owed to his efforts.

"It's such a relief," said the Countess.

Mayol engaged her in talk, whilst Sir Mark, drawing Simon aside, chopped off sentences about the beauty spots of the Coast.

"Certainly saw best of 'em, eh, Peter?" he said.

"I certainly did, Sir Mark."

"Nothing but pleasure, my dear boy," said Sir Mark, lowering his voice confidentially. "Told you I'd taken a fancy you Marseilles. You—you wouldn't change mind, what?"

"No, Sir Mark."

"Can't say I blame you. No. Pity. Great possibilities. You've proved it. However. Pleasant work, if strenuous. Knew the moment set eyes on you, could do it. Oh, well!"

There was no mention of Elise among the beauty spots. Sir Mark was the soul of discretion.

Behind him Simon heard the click of his mother's handbag and a rustle of notes.

"The police charities," said Detective Mayol, "will be deeply grateful for this generous gesture, madame la comtesse."

Simon smiled. The amusements of home were simple and easy to enjoy. And he was so grateful to the two comedians—how strange and sweet Elise's voice had been!—that he couldn't grudge them their little harvests.

Now that the various business was out of the way they rejoined the Countess and Mayol. Talk went on, as it does on yachts in the sunshine when good friends foregather.

Simon fell asleep.

Delighted laughter, and his mother's soft hand on his brow awakened him.

"Regard this one," Detective Mayol was saying, "he is in slumber like a little child. No wonder my men were on duty round the twenty-four hour clock."

"Worn out with beauty, what?" Sir Mark added.

"Darling," said his mother, "I think you'd better go and rest. You're not accustomed to so much sightseeing. You won't be disturbed. We're sailing soon."

"Thank you, mother," said Simon, rising, and he and his good friends shook hands, his friends finding it all most highly diverting.

II

Having escaped from the prisons in which his life had been spent, Simon didn't dream any more. His sleep aboard the *Stormalong* was sweet and empty. So that, when ardent lips seemed to press on his, and he heard a girl's hushed trill of laughter, he assumed vaguely that it must be Elise, though neither kiss nor laughter was hers.

Also he was allowed to remain asleep.

III

The yacht pulsed along through the brightness of the stars and the pale, milky light of the waxing moon. Stepping on deck Simon looked about with an interest that was only natural. Indeed, many another man would have been astounded and staggered, elated or dismayed. But that wasn't Simon's way. He took surprises in his long and easy stride.

During his well-earned rest the *Stormalong* had done much more than sail from Monaco. She had been transformed: she was a different yacht.

Her quiet deck, where once a handful of people had played their own peculiar games, had become as noisy, colourful, busy and crowded as a parrot-house. Girls were everywhere, chattering, laughing, smoking—masses of girls, blondes and brunettes, slim and plump, tall and tiny. They sprawled at full length on the deck, they sat with their backs against the rails, they grouped in clusters. The light was not strong enough to reveal them in detail, but eyes glittered and teeth flashed and skin gleamed whitely. The air was a babel of foreign talk, quite unintelligible to Simon, but very animated and loud and oddly musical. The gramophone, seldom used in the old and sedate days, crooned a love song. Girls listened; girls danced to it. The warm night was heavy with many blended perfumes.

Simon's appearance at the lighted hatchway caused a sudden lull which was followed by even more animated discussion. At a loss for the moment he stood gazing at this new and crowded small world. Down in the stern, under the awning where electric light made a golden tent, sat the Countess and Dr. John. They were familiar; they at least were unchanged. Champagne glasses stood on the small table between them, and a bottle rested in an ice bucket. They looked remote and cut off, like people on a stage. The Countess was beaming in a fond but short-sighted way at the dim mass of her guests, and Dr. John was talking earnestly, his big head thrust forward from between hunched and pointed shoulders. His little hands fluttered. He was a large bat, dazzled and brought to rest by the brightness in which he found himself.

"Excuse me," said Simon. "Sorry." He worked his way down to the stern, stepping over and among the girls, rather as if it were market day at Blickington and he had found himself in the sheep pens. He progressed through a wave of giggles and comments, but as he didn't understand a word, all he could say was, "Excuse me. Sorry."

As he took shape the Countess waved her cigarette in its long holder.

"Careful, darling," she called. "Don't stand on any of them if you can help it. You're quite a weight, you know."

"Good-evening, mother, Dr. John," said Simon.

"Have you quite got over your strenuous sight-seeing, dear boy?"

"Yes, mother."

"Then come and sit down. You must hear all about this latest development. I suppose you're almost startled out of your wits?"

"No, mother," said Simon, drawing up a chair.

There were more watchful eyes than ever now aboard the *Stormalong*. Simon was reminded of the occasion when he had appeared as a Gibson girl in the Stalagluft.

The Countess patted his hand.

"You're so soothing and placid, Peter," she said. "Your dear father would have doted on you. Ah, here comes Paul with another bottle and more glasses. He's so attentive. Really, there are moments when I'm glad one of us murdered poor Wilson. Paul doesn't even wait for orders."

"Perhaps he is a little too zealous," said Dr. John, giving Simon a significant look. "However, to-night is an occasion, and even I must relax the rules."

"How wise and good you are, Dr. John," said the Countess, gratefully. "But I mustn't praise Paul too much, must I?—or he'll go overboard, too. That would be a shame. Such a nice young man. Thank you, Paul."

The steward opened the new bottle, filled the glasses, and found a path back through the maze of girls.

"I was just remarking to your mother, Peter, that if one chanced to believe in prayers she can count herself a fortunate woman."

"Dear Dr. John," said the Countess, "such a tease! As if everyone doesn't believe in prayers!"

"I meant that you, Hilda, will be remembered in the prayers of these poor souls as long as they live."

"Isn't that nice?" The Countess's dimples played in pride and pleasure.

"You see, Peter, it's hard for a simple soul like you, accustomed to every comfort and luxury, to understand just what it means to them," said Dr. John. "You can't place yourself in their shoes."

"How can you expect the poor dear boy to do any such thing?" the Countess asked. "He doesn't even know who they are. Do explain about them being Depressed People, Dr. John."

"Of course! Of course!" He rubbed little hands together

and assumed a solemn and reverent expression. "Your mother has performed a most charitable and generous act. She is a Florence Nightingale, a Lady Bountiful, a veritable Grace Darling with a lifeboat. These wretched young women you see before you, Peter, are Displaced Persons—survivors of the gas-chambers, lost souls from the prison camps, nationless wanderers of a Europe which has no home to offer them. Their plight, one would say, is enough to make the angels weep, that is if one chanced to believe in angels."

"Oh, Dr. John, you cynic!" said the Countess. "How can you say such angelic things and claim not to believe in angels?"

She was so touched, however, by his tribute that she had to wipe away a tear, and, quite without thought, she re-filled her glass.

"And now," said Dr. John, "on your mother's magic carpet we waft these luckless ones away to the promised and historic land of Egypt where new lives and welcoming arms await them."

"Really, Dr. John," said the Countess, "you should have been a poet or a politician or something."

"Dear Hilda!" smiled Dr. John.

"For Depressed People don't they seem happy?" said the Countess.

"I'd been thinking that," said Simon.

"No wonder, seeing they've escaped from worse than death," said Dr. John. "And they owe all their joy to you, Hilda. You are their rescuer, their saviour."

Captain Pam breezed along the deck, fine in white ducks, touching his peaked cap in sailorly salutes to the passengers he was steering to a new life, a beaming British sea-dog.

"Ah," he boomed, "the good old *Stormalong* is really doing her stuff now. Once again, an English ship to the rescue of the unfortunate in the grand old tradition. I'm a proud and happy man to be her master." He filled a glass and raised it. "Hilda, I drink to you in admiration and gratitude."

The Countess glowed.

"I'm so happy too," she said. "It just shows it pays to be charitable. The yacht seems happy and full of life. It wouldn't matter even if Mary Jane were with us. Safety in numbers, eh? There's hardly room to commit a murder now."

"Talking of room," said Captain Pam, "let's to business. I take it we are all prepared to suffer some discomfort in this grand cause. It will only be for a little while. Don't worry, Hilda. Dr. John and I have everything doped out."

"How kind you are," said the Countess, raising her glass to him in turn. "I don't know what I should do without you both."

"Nothing is too much trouble to save you trouble, Hilda," said Dr. John gallantly.

And, indeed, the owner of the *Stormalong* had only to listen to the arrangements which had been made by her friends and servants for the use of her yacht. It struck Simon again that his mother was a very good-hearted person, and he smiled at her affectionately.

Dr. John and Captain Pam mentioned first the sacrifices they were making. Dr. John was giving up his cabin and moving in with Captain Pam. Each made it clear that this was a most unusual gesture on the part of a master and a ship's surgeon. The cabin which had been Mary Jane's was available, and four of the girls would occupy the sitting-room of the suite by night, leaving it free in the daytime for the Countess and Simon to use it for meals. The saloon would be available by night as a dormitory, and meals would be served to the Displaced Persons there in relays.

"Poor creatures," said Captain Pam, waving his hand towards them, "they are accustomed to cramped quarters, and it is only for a night or so. We are going to put the last five in your cabin, Peter, old boy."

The Countess looked concerned.

"But, Peter," she said, "five girls in with you—even if they are depressed? You wouldn't like that, would you?" Her big blue eyes looked at him sharply. "Or would you?"

Captain Pam and Dr. John laughed heartily.

"No, no, Hilda," said the Captain. "Even in such a good cause we couldn't ask Peter to suffer that. He is to move into the fo'c'sle where there is a bunk available. You wouldn't mind that, would you, old man, remembering what these wretched young women have suffered?"

Simon had been considering the mass of girls, and his nose had been sniffing the mingled perfumes which drifted aft.

Being a quiet fellow and having married Daphne when he was so young, he had not been a great one for girls, but his experiences since he had escaped into the wider world had shown him that there was more to be said for the sex than he had guessed previously. Seen in a swarm like this, however, they struck him as rather overwhelming, and the thought of being lodged forward in the masculine world of the crew's quarters seemed a fine idea.

"I don't mind a scrap," he said.

"I knew you wouldn't, Peter. As a matter of fact, Paul's just taken your things along."

"Thanks," said Simon.

"Oh, you dear, dear boy!" his mother cried. "All the money in the world couldn't spoil my Peter. If only your father could hear you agreeing to endure such hardships. We really must get in touch with a good medium in Egypt. I should imagine Egypt must be full of perfectly marvellous ones. I remember once—"

"There's just one other point, old man," Captain Pamphillion interposed hastily. "I shall have to get the deck-hand, Spike, to lend a hand in the galley, and so on. How would you like the chance to take over his wheel, and make yourself a real quartermaster?"

"I should like that, too, very much," said Simon.

"You're a chap after my own heart," Captain Pam approved.

"It will make me feel so proud of you, darling," said the Countess, "to think of you in charge of the *Stormalong*—just as if you were the Captain."

Captain Pam's hearty laugh boomed.

"Well, hardly that, Hilda, hardly that," he pointed out. "Still our young man will be lending a hand, and that will be something. There, we have everything in order now, and seeing we've twenty passengers I think you'll agree that I—"

"And I," Dr. John popped in.

"—Have done a good job, and saved you any bother."

"You have! You have!" cried the Countess. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Now we must see about getting them bedded down." Captain Pam took a whistle from his pocket and blew a loud,

shrill blast. "The wretched children are accustomed to discipline," he said.

And it seemed they were, for the dancing and giggling and chatter ceased, the gramophone was shut off, and the Displaced Persons turned and faced the stern.

"Time for bed, girls," boomed the Captain. "All below now, and we'll show you your quarters. Follow me, please."

Though they might not have understood the actual words they grasped that an order had been given. Captain Pam marched through them, waving them to follow him, and Dr. John brought up the rear, shooing them along, so that Simon was reminded again of the sheep at Blickington on market day. But instead of baa-ing this flock chattered and twittered and laughed.

The *Stormalong* looked herself again, the deck gleaming pale and empty in the moonlight, but from the open portholes along the sides there drifted up a babel of foreign tongues, excited and high-pitched.

"It reminds me of being back at school," said the Countess with a little sigh. "Ah, me, that was a long time ago. I was at a convent in Belgium for a while, but they couldn't teach me a thing, and I was expelled after a week or so."

"Were you, mother?"

"Yes," said the Countess. "The butcher's boy. Such a nice scamp with eyes rather like yours. He said his father wouldn't give him any money, so I stole some for him from the offertory box in the chapel. I wonder where he is now? I could do so much for him. I wonder is he a Depressed Person? He wasn't in my day. It was Easter and the box was full. He was happy as a sandboy."

IV

Simple Simon, stooping because of his height, descended the few steps into the fo'c'sle, and was immediately at home. Straightening up, he stood looking about with a pleased and quiet smile.

This was much more snug than his luxury cabin—a man's place and another world quite apart within the small world of

the *Stormalong*. Here the Countess was a remote figure: merely the owner who paid the wages; here life was a simple matter of earning a simple living; here was a neat home without trimmings. No expensive rugs, but clean bare scrubbed boards; no cloth on the table, but scrubbed wood again; no fancy shades on the electric lights, just the bright bulbs; no curtains on the open port-holes through which the night flowed in. The air, though rather thick with tobacco smoke, seemed very clean. The people who dwelt here had no real money and no craving for it. They didn't plot and scheme. They wandered the seas, and so long as they had bed and board and smokes and beer all was well.

This, the gypsy in Simon saw at once, was a real caravan.

Bunks rose on either side, and lockers filled the corners. Up in the bows were two doors, the one labelled W.C., the other Shower. Everything was plain, practical and compact.

Caleb, the tattooed sailor, and Green and Abinger, the two engineers, were playing a cosy game of nap at the narrow table which ran down the centre. Simon had talked with them all, of course, but now for the first time he was one of them. That was a good feeling. The cards were old and thumbed, but they were a straightforward pack unlike those which were always being laid on the table back aft. Bottles of French beer, with hinged porcelain stoppers, stood at their elbows with mugs beside them. Since Simon had no sense of intruding, there was no awkwardness on either side. Seeing him standing there, at ease, wearing a contented smile, they greeted him with a friendly word and nods and grins.

"Ah," said Simon, "this is a bit of all right. Which is my bunk?"

"Top one, there," said Caleb, jerking his thumb. "Your gear's in that locker. They sent it along."

It was a small locker, but there would be ample room for his possessions. These still only amounted to the clothes loaned him by Captain Pamphillion, and toilet things provided by the late Mr. Wilson. In each port there had been plans for fitting out Simon, but something had always intervened. It hadn't mattered: his needs were few.

"Thanks," said Simon, sitting down on the end of the bench.

"Want a game?"

"No, thanks. I've got the middle watch, instead of Spike."

"That's so, Simon," Caleb said. "Have a drink?"

"Thanks."

A bottle and a mug were pushed along to him, and the game proceeded. Simon lit a cigarette and passed them round. He wasn't Peter Mountford here. Spike had explained about all that. No fuss, no questions. He was Simple Simon again, elbows on a wooden table, drinking beer, watching a game of nap. He might have been in The Pheasant, but the best of it was he wasn't. The hissing song of the sea, flung back by the *Stormalong's* white bows, came in as a reminder that the caravan was going on, going on. That was a good feeling, too. Simon had played nap in other bunk-lined rooms which weren't alive and full of the sense of freedom, but very dead and stationary and prisoned behind barb-wire fences.

The jack of hearts was played. Nobody gave Simon a knowing glance. Losses were paid in English copper and silver instead of fancy French notes. Just a pleasant and normal amount of swear words in the conversation.

Simon smoked in a most comfortable frame of mind. Life in the big world provided lots of fun and contrast. This time last night he'd been with Elise in her white palace. That hadn't been bad either in its own way.

The plain ship's clock above the door showed a quarter to twelve. The cards were packed away. Abinger would have to relieve the chief down in the engine room at midnight, and Simon would take over the wheel from Briggs the other deck-hand. Life went smoothly in the fo'c'sle. Nobody ever had to wonder what the other was up to. He was on watch or off. Yes, as Simon had known all along, it wasn't at all a bad job working in a yacht.

Caleb stood up and pulled off his sleeveless vest.

"Think I'll take a shower," he said. "Dam' hot to-night."

They agreed it was dam' hot.

The Union Jack fluttered gaily on his chest, dragon crawled beneath, and down on his stomach two blue and red girls played football with his navel. As he stretched and his muscles moved, they sprang into life and tried hard to kick that elusive target.

Pleased by Simon's admiring glance, the sailor wiggled

and the girls were very active. Then he turned about and made the rampant British lion on his shoulders caper.

"Wonderful thing, tattooing," he said. "Had it all done twenty years ago when I was a kid. Just as good to-day as it was then. I've had a lot of fun out of it in my time, I have. Good for a laugh always and mighty pretty, too. A bloke name of Stubbs down Poplar way did it. A real artist."

Caleb took his towel but he paused as Spike entered.

Spike looked very monkeyish. His freckles danced and his grin was wide.

"Cor blimey," he said, "have I got me a job? Didn't fancy it much at first, but I don't mind how long it goes on now. Millions of girls—millions! Course being foreigners they're not over fussy. Because I'm giving the steward a hand they seem to figure I'm only a kind of a part of the ship. What I haven't seen! I wish they was going to be aboard a year. And being paid for it! Nice work if you can get it. It's a perishin' shame to take the money."

He had an interested audience for the details.

"I wonder," said Caleb, "if any of 'em would like to see me tattooing?"

V

All about the lovely, quiet, empty world of sea and sky. The wheel-house was a little box suspended in space. Through the open front, for the windows had been pushed back in their grooves, the breath of breeze created in the still air by the yacht's progress drifted caressingly over Simon's skin as he stood at the wheel, barefooted, wearing only a pair of Captain Pamphillion's khaki shorts. The Mediterranean was as calm as the duck-pond at Royals Bottom, and, alone, in charge, Simon might well have been sailing the *Fearless* again, having stolen out from his bedroom whilst all the village was asleep.

The compass card, with its regular pattern printed in bold black on a gleaming white background, seemed to gaze watchfully like a living creature imprisoned behind glass in a little, bright cell. It had an hypnotic effect but Simon was its master. He only had to turn the smooth spokes of the wheel this way

or that to hold it trembling but steady on the course, for all its restless eagerness to roam. He kept a look-out ahead, of course, also, but there was nothing there save the unfolding veils of night. The clock's hands moved to two. He reached up and struck four bells, clang-clang, clang-clang, in the approved fashion, quite the quartermaster. The sounds went out into the great silence in two twin golden waves. The watch was halfway through. He checked the vagrant creature beneath the glass.

A little hushed laugh which he had heard before sounded beside him. Simon didn't jump, because that wasn't his way, but he turned his head promptly with only natural interest, since the laugh was very musical and pleasant to hear.

"Hul-lo," said a voice to match the laugh.

"Hullo," said Simon.

A little dazzled for the instant by his long concentration on the binnacle Simon couldn't see his visitor very clearly. The moon was going away into the west, taking its light with it, leaving only starshine. It seemed to him that the girl wore a kind of hooded cape made of some shining material which reached from her head to her thighs—a novel costume but cool and becoming even at that first glance. And then he realized that the cloak was made not of any material at all but of long hair of a brighter gold than that of the compass or the notes of the ship's bell.

He fancied she must be a mermaid who had climbed aboard out of the warm, singing waters, and though this was against reason and highly improbable it wasn't any more so than her mere presence there like that.

Her face was dim and pale, but he could make out a sparkle of big eyes which must be blue, and she was smiling at him, for he could see the pearl-like gleam of teeth.

The great wide world was undoubtedly full of pleasant happenings.

Whilst he was still enjoying this knowledge the girl stepped lightly across, stood on tiptoe, rested her hands on his chest, and kissed him. In doing so she came into the glow from the binnacle. Her eyes were even bigger and a much deeper blue than he had expected, and her lips were cool and soft. Her skin was honey tinted, like the petal of a tea-rose.

With another little laugh she faded back into the gloom.

Although all this was unusual, Simon was haunted by that thought which comes at times that it had happened before.

Had he been of a hot-headed and impetuous temperament he might well have forgotten his duty in all the circumstances, but he was a simple soul who took things as they came. He recalled that he was at the wheel of his mother's yacht, in charge, responsible for all aboard.

"Oh, gosh!" he exclaimed, dismayed.

The card had seized the opportunity and had swung away a good quarter of its circle. Simon gave it all his attention, and tamed and mastered it again. That done, he looked about. The girl had found the tall stool which stood by the chart table. She had perched on it, her feet tucked round the legs, her hair draped in a shimmering cascade. Now that he knew how she looked Simon found he could see her more clearly. She was very good to see, but he didn't let her distract him entirely from his task.

"Two times now," she said. She had a pretty way of speaking with a soft foreign accent. She seemed to pick up each word separately and put it into its place.

Simon's face in the light showed that he didn't understand.

"This afternoon," she said, "I look in your cabin. You are asleep. So fine. I kiss you then."

"It was you!" said Simon, remembering..

"You are asleep."

"I thought it must be a dream," said Simon, "and yet that didn't seem right either because I don't dream any more. Do you kiss everyone you find asleep?"

"If they are so fine."

Simon liked her even better. That was a sensible answer.

"You're a Displaced Person?"

"I am Hansi. I come from Carinthia. I work in the hotel by the Worthersee when I am little. That is where I learn the English and about Englishmen. But I never did see one as good as you. You don't go to Austria?"

"No, I haven't got about much until just lately."

Simon didn't bother to mention that he had gone to Germany and stayed a long time. This wasn't the moment to delay in the past telling war stories.

"You are called Peter, the English milady's son?"

"I am called Peter."

"You like me a lot?"

"Yes," said Simon, "but of course I haven't seen much of you."

Hansi laughed again, a small, silver sound like a brook running briefly over pebbles.

"Then how much is it you are expecting to see of a girl?"

"I didn't mean that—I mean it's dark."

There was an electric torch on the chart table. Hansi, it seemed, had good eyesight. She discovered it, and holding it before her switched it on. The effect was startling. She sat bathed in white light against the curtain of the night, a radiant and glowing picture so beautiful that she didn't seem human. She knew it, too, and looked very pleased with herself. She had every cause.

"You like me now?" she asked.

"I do," said Simon. "Better put it out," he added. "It's the Captain's."

He was being shaped into a sailor. A display of that kind wasn't proper when a fellow was on watch. Besides the torch was for official uses, such as writing up the log or studying the chart. It hadn't been put there to provide illumination for a golden blonde.

Decorous gloom returned.

"He's so hot below," said Hansi. "I am coming on deck for air, when I peeped in and see it is you so fine here. Then I come in. That is good?"

"Very," Simon had to admit, though he found that the restless gnome in its glass house had strayed again. It was as well Captain Pamphillion wasn't on deck to see the wake. It must have had as many loops and curves as a landed eel.

"I then am glad," said Hansi. "It is a pity you have to make the ship go, but there will be other times. Do you love Hansi?"

"Very much," said Simon with his customary candour.

"Then we—"

Hansi didn't finish the sentence. She darted off the stool and out through the door so quickly that it seemed as if she had vanished, as if she had never been there.

A moment later Dr. John appeared as a peaky shadow at

the other door. Hansi's ears must have been even sharper than her eyes.

"Ah, Peter," he said, rasping his hands together, "you're better off here than below. It would almost make one think a job of work was a blessing, if you chanced to believe in work or blessings. Smoke?" He offered a cigarette in a packet. "That Mary Jane—!" he said, mourning the fine case which had been presented to him by Princess Bareta.

They lit up. Simon had no difficulty about keeping the yacht on her course now. Dr. John's presence wasn't nearly so distracting as that of Hansi.

"By the way, Peter, whilst we have a moment's privacy," said Dr. John, "I'll prove to you once again what a very good friend I am. Dear Captain Pam is setting a trap for you."

"Is he?" said Simon, since Dr. John had paused expecting some comment.

"A very pretty trap, and very prettily baited. His purpose, of course, is clear. He hopes to discredit you in the eyes of Hilda, your doting mother. He is jealous of the position you have won for yourself here aboard. It was all his idea to bundle you out into the fo'c'sle as if you were nobody."

"I like it there," said Simon.

"That's as maybe, and beside the point. I was speaking of a trap. Be on your guard. Captain Pam has managed to smuggle aboard among these poor creatures a girl who, I'm convinced, isn't a Displaced Person at all. I believe he's hired her for the express purpose of causing trouble for you. You're rather a simpleton, my dear Peter, where women are concerned, and you might easily be hoodwinked and victimized. I've warned you before not to accept anyone or anything at face value in the *Stormalong*. I am in truth your friend when I say beware of an Austrian girl who calls herself Hansi. She is beautiful and fair. You can't mistake her. She'll see you don't. Have no dealings with her. She's a mere decoy duck set by your enemy, Captain Pamphillion."

"She sounds a very nice duck" said Simon.

He could have sworn he heard the faintest ghost of a laugh from the deck which was hidden by the woodwork of the house. But perhaps it was only an echo in his own mind. When Dr. John had finished his cigarette and gone below, she

certainly wasn't in hiding on the other side for he left the wheel and looked for himself.

When he glanced at the clock it was time to strike five bells. The notes rang out, sharp and golden. The watch was passing. Quite a lot had happened in the last half-hour, considering one thing and another. He gave all his attention to the wanderer in its house of glass.

VI

Had he followed his own inclinations Simon would have breakfasted in the clean, bare fo'c'sle, but it had been arranged otherwise, and, as he could not deny any wish of the mother who had done so much for him, he was in her sitting-room among the cushions and silks and fripperies. The place seemed more feminine and soft than ever by contrast with that other world. Though the portholes were open behind their expensive curtains the air was heavy with perfume—not only the Countess's own and the smell of her pink cigarettes, but other and foreign scents which lingered from the night. The room had been hastily straightened up, and yet it still wore a kind of crushed and crumpled appearance. Even the bulging cushions looked flattened and tired.

The Countess was no longer in mourning for poor Wilson. That page had been turned. In honour of her son she had put on a magnificent pink wrap trimmed with masses of soft feathers at neck and cuffs. She was made up as if for a ball, and she wore such jewellery as Mary Jane had left with the addition of a necklace of square-cut emeralds which she had bought with some of her winnings at Monte Carlo. All this splendour and her best efforts could not conceal, however, that she wasn't in a very happy mood.

Paul, for once looking harassed and rather wild-eyed, had served breakfast, but now the Countess pushed hers on one side almost untouched. After his night-watch Simon had a healthy hunger.

"You dear boy," she said. "What an appetite you have! How nice it is to have a son whom nothing upsets! I don't feel at all myself this morning. I suppose I miss dear Mary Jane

and her massage. What a pity that young man came and ran off with her." Simon went on eating; he never attempted to put his mother right in matters of fact. That wouldn't have been kind. "I miss Wilson, too. I'm sure nothing would have flustered him. But nothing. With you for a son and dear Wilson for a husband I should have been sitting pretty. Ah, well, that's life—here to-day and gone to-morrow." She floated to her feet. There were pink feathers on her slippers. "I think I'll just drink my breakfast," she decided, and going into the inner cabin returned with a bottle of Pernod.

"My word, mother," said Simon, "you've made that last a good long time." Marseilles and Margot seemed worlds away.

She gave him a wink.

"No secrets between us, darling," she said, breaking suddenly into her deep chuckle as she poured the drink. "Pierre, the hairdresser, smuggled it aboard for me at Monte. A perfect lamb, that dear man. The rest had gone down the hatch long before with all the upsets we've had. Detectives and so on. And now these Depressed People. There's always something. I suppose one shouldn't say it—since they're going to remember me in their prayers—but they look like being bloody pests."

"Do they, mother?" said Simon concerned.

"There's such an awful lot of them. Like a swarm of locusts. I'm a sensitive creature under all my high spirits, Peter. Your poor father often said I reminded him of an orchid, so frail, so easily bruised. It's my vibrations, you know. Or don't you know about vibrations, Peter?"

"I'm afraid I don't," said Simon.

"I used to," said the Countess. "It was all explained to me by a very clever man who was a specialist in those kind of things. Very expensive but worth every guinea. They're things you give off, I fancy, rather like an aura, whatever that may be. If they come into collision with the wrong vibrations you're up the pole. This specialist explained it all at the time. I wish I could remember his name. He was very dark and handsome, I recall, and had black eyes rather like yours, only they weren't kind and sweet but fierce and commanding. He used to bully his patients most beautifully. We all loved him. I remember . . ."

Simon listened with proper attention to his mother's experiences during her course of treatment. He didn't think he would have enjoyed it himself.

"But what I'm getting round to is that these Depressed People seem to do something to my vibrations. The *Stormalong* doesn't seem as peaceful and quiet as she's always been." She poured herself another Pernod in her abstraction. "That kind of thing," she said, nodding at the tantalus from which the padlock, faulty or otherwise, was missing now. The three cut-glass decanters were empty.

"What happened, mother?" asked Simon, concerned.

"They got at them during the night and drank the lot," said the Countess, and sighed. "For Depressed People they certainly have a nerve. They don't seem to have learnt very good manners, or even much discipline, in all those prison camps and things. But then I suppose you can't blame them, and after all they are our guests. My vibrations being upset, as I say, I didn't sleep as well as usual last night, and I must say there seemed to be a lot of fluttering and rustling and giggling going on. The whole yacht seemed to me like a kettle on the boil. Once I was sure I heard Dr. John whispering in here, but I put it down to imagination. After all, what would he have been doing at that hour of the night?—unless, of course, one of the Depressed People was sick." Her eyes widened in sudden alarm. "You don't think any of them could have brought the plague aboard or anything like that, Peter?"

"No, mother," said Simon. "I saw Dr. John myself when I was on watch in the early morning, and he was quite happy."

"Thank goodness," said the Countess. "Because, of course, you never know with Depressed People. They've been in such terrible places and suffered so much that they might have simply anything! It would be too awful if when we got to Egypt we were put in quarantine with them all on board for weeks and weeks."

Simon patted her hand and promised that nothing like that would happen. His meal over, he lit a cigarette but refused a Pernod. The Countess replenished her glass, and took the bottle into her inner room. "Just in case, you know—?" she said, returning. "It was bad enough with Dr. John around, but now with these Depressed People a poor old woman can't

even call her soul her own." With her third drink the Countess brightened considerably. She sat back in her chair, and fitted a cigarette into her long holder. Simon supplied a light.

"You dear sympathetic child," said the Countess. "Listening all this time to my grumbling and complaints. If only Mary Jane would come back—! But tell me about yourself. Are you enjoying being a sailor, boy?"

"Very much," said Simon.

"You didn't run us on the rocks or anything?"

"Not once, mother," smiled Simon.

"How pleased your poor father would have been! He hated the sea like poison, but any man would be delighted to think of his son learning to be a sailor-boy so quickly. And you didn't find your trick at the wheel dull and boring?"

"Oh, no, mother, far from it, mother," said Simon, and his face lit up in a manner which confirmed his words. "It was really great fun."

"If you wanted me I could come and sit there with you, darling."

"I wouldn't dream of it, mother," said Simon earnestly. "It would be too tiring for you. Besides steering is quite a tricky job when you're new to it. You have to be on your toes all the time, and you might get off the course if you didn't give it all your attention. I learnt that last night."

"Really, I think it's marvellous!" said the Countess, and they chattered on of Simon's father and buttons, of the undesirability of actors as husbands, of the stage in general, and other subjects, passing from one to the other with the easy transitions of dreams. Simon, as usual, wasn't bored. He knew his company was doing his mother's vibrations good, and in the absence of Mary Jane and the presence of all her guests she needed any help she could get.

Paul cleared the breakfast things, and they still sat on. But a little after ten the Countess decided it was time for her to dress.

She pressed Simon's hand in her chubby grasp.

"Bless you, dear son," she said, "you've been such a help. And at least the Depressed People have saved us from dear Dr. John and Captain Pam popping in all the time, which is something. Do you think it would be rude if you asked Captain

Pam to put a rope across a little bit of the stern? I hope I'm Florence Nightingale and so on, but it would be nice to feel there was one little corner of the deck we could call our own."

"It's a good idea, mother," said Simon. "I'll tell him."

He kissed her on the brow, and went above.

The morning was bright and blue and sunny, with a cooling breeze, but Simon spared the weather and the lovely Mediterranean seascape only a very brief glance. There was far too much to see aboard the *Stormalong*.

The dim mass of girls on the previous night by daylight made a gay and colourful pattern, so that to glance along the deck was rather like looking into a kaleidescope. Simon's mother had given him a kaleidescope once, but his father had sold it at a profit to a chance customer whose little girl had cried for it. Simon hadn't liked his father doing that, but it was a long time ago and he bore no malice now. Yes, very like that pretty toy. Most of the girls wore bright clothes, and there were more blondes than brunettes. They lay sunbathing on the clean planks, or sat in clusters chattering. The majority puffed cigarettes, and they didn't seem to mind much where they put their ash, not being used to travelling in yachts. There were so many of them and they were so closely packed that it was hard to pick out individuals. Simon couldn't even see Hansi at the moment, and he didn't like to go looking for her. Somehow she belonged to the quiet and secret night, not the broad day.

For Displaced Persons they looked quite well dressed, well fed, and well made up. Whatever sufferings they had endured, no matter how homeless they had been, they seemed to have managed to have their hair waved and dyed, and to buy plenty of lipstick and rouge and perfume and the like. If they had invaded Royals Bottom they would have caused a sensation. Even at the Jersey holiday camp they would have made the girls seem dull and ordinary. And their spirits were so gay ; they were so vivacious. It was really a wonderful sight.

If Simon had been at all self-conscious he must have been embarrassed by the mass regard of all those eyes—eyes of blue and eyes of brown, long green eyes and dark deep eyes—but as it was he merely smiled at them all in a general kind of way,

and went in search of the Captain. The parrot-like chatter rose louder.

Captain Pamphillion was taking a turn at the wheel, as he sometimes did in the daytime to allow the hands to get on with other duties.

"Morning, Peter, my boy," he boomed. "You're a little early, but that's as well. I have many things to attend to, and then I'll be taking my sights at noon. Not much leisure for the master of a yacht, particularly when she's turned into a mercy ship. I'm an older man than you, Peter, and more experienced in the ways of the wicked world. In fact, old boy, I regard you almost as my son. So take a tip from me—keep your eyes in the boat, as we say at sea. Don't get entangled with any of these skirts. Lots of them are quite attractive, but I don't think your mother would approve. When you're ashore it's another matter." He gave Simon a nod and a rakish look. "What the eye doesn't see—! But aboard it's another story. Not a chance! And always remember you have an enemy."

"Have I?" said Simon.

"You know that very well. I've warned you from the first. He'd have had you in hot water—or perhaps in cold water!—long before this, but for the fact that he knows I'm watching his every move and am more than a match for him. So long as you stand in with me, Peter, you've nothing to fear from Dr. John." He had glanced about warily before he spoke, and he had hushed his boom. Now he reassured himself that they were still alone and spoke even lower. "From chance remarks which he let slip when he'd had a few drinks on top of a few shots of dope, he's trying to make even these luckless girls serve his purpose. He has a devilishly ingenious mind that I grant you. He sees, as I see, that the presence of all these petticoats puts your position in danger. He's hoping that you'll drop a ton of bricks, and that we'll be rid of you at Alexandria."

Simon looked interested but made no comment.

"He's pinning his faith in particular on the pick of the bunch."

"Who is she?" asked Simon, which was natural enough, since any young man confronted with such an array of femininity might be interested in the judgment of his elders.

"An Austrian girl called Hansi," said Captain Pam. "She's a pippin. A knock-out. And Dr. John hopes she'll be a knock-out drop for you. I chanced to overhear him—quite by accident, of course—giving her certain instructions. She'll probably try to get you into a compromising situation, and then—bang!—Dr. John and your mother will discover you. Believe me, I know Hilda better than you do. She may be your mother, but she'd be as mad as a hornet if she found you having fun and games aboard her *Stormalong*. It would be an even simpler and surer way of getting you out of the way than by pushing you overboard, and you know how simple that is." He gave his hearty sailor's laugh. "Why, didn't I nearly do it by accident myself one night?"

"Yes, I remember, Captain Pam," said Simon.

"So don't forget—no Hansi," said Captain Pamphillion. "If you'll take over now, Peter, I'll go and see about that line across the stern. Keep her as she goes."

Although his watch wasn't due to start until midday Simon was glad enough to be at the wheel. The deck was rather crowded. He concentrated on the round and lively gnome in its house of glass and brass. Girls came and looked in at him and giggled and whispered. But Hansi was not among them. If she had been she would have laughed on that hushed note of hers which he would have recognized immediately. It was warm in the wheelhouse, and the thought of her in the cool cloak of her hair made good company, though he didn't allow it to distract him from his duties. He had his reputation as a quartermaster to think of. Captain Pamphillion was about, and he would have his eye on the wake.

The master took his sights, and Simon, as he struck eight bells, experienced a pang of concern remembering how erratic his steering had been at one stage last night, but apparently his luck held. The *Stormalong*'s position, it seemed, was as it should have been. Perhaps those wanderings from the course had cancelled each other out.

Caleb relieved him for half-an-hour at one o'clock, and he ate a peaceful lunch in the fo'c'sle. He didn't envy Spike the job he was enjoying so. In a ship full of girls Simon liked being a deckhand with simple, straightforward duties. Besides he was in a happy position: Hansi was the pick of the bunch.

He resumed his trick in an amiable frame of mind, and the sunny hours flowed by. There was nothing wrong with the wake the *Stormalong* spun behind her on the azure sea. In the morning, though it had not worried him, he'd had rather the feeling that he was on exhibition in a glass case, but now as the heat of the afternoon waxed he had no callers. Caleb gave him the explanation when, as Simon made eight bells, he came to take over.

"The sleeping beauties," said Caleb. "What an eyeful!"

He chuckled, and it was funny to think of the blue and red girls trying to kick the football beneath his vest.

Simon saw what Caleb meant when he stepped out of the house. The deck was less crowded now, for apparently many of the girls preferred to take their siesta below, but the remainder lay, strewn like new mown hay. Some slept on their faces, some on their backs. Here a girl pillow'd her head on another, there one lay curled up in a ball. Arms were flung this way and that. The breeze stirred black hair and gold.

Stepping warily, eyes cast down, Simon picked a path through this field of girlhood. Two of them, side by side, flat on their backs, mouths open, were snoring, even though they were quite pretty. Simon was too polite to give them more than a passing glance.

Hansi, asleep, would never have done that.

But there was no sign of her until, the last obstacle surmounted, he raised his head, and discovered that she was sitting in the stern, on the further side of the rope, in happy conversation with the Countess. Simon was pleased but not surprised. It would take more than a bit of rope to keep Hansi from getting where she wanted to be; she was good at making friends.

The Countess, who was in her sailor costume, greeted Simon with a wave, and then hurriedly put her finger to her lips. Apparently she was well-pleased that all her Depressed Persons save one should be asleep. Simon agreed with her. She might be crazy, but his mother was sound in many ways.

Hansi sat with hands folded on her lap and eyes modestly lowered. She wore one of those bright flowered dresses all stitched round the waist which Simon had admired on Austrian girls when they danced on the screen at the Regal

in Blickington. It suited her admirably, but not so well as her hair, coiled now in tight, shining plaits which curled round and round her head in a woven crown spun from purest gold.

"Ah, dear boy," said the Countess, "are you tired out?"

"No mother," said Simon. "I feel fine."

"I'm so glad," said the Countess, "because I want you to meet somebody very nice. Hansi, this is Peter, my son, whom I was telling you about."

Hansi raised her head. Her eyes paled the Mediterranean into the duck pond, and her mouth, pouting a little and like a red rose, looked as kissable as it was. She smiled most prettily, but with a girlish demureness. Nobody would ever have guessed that they had met before, let alone how they had met. She rose from her chair and holding her frock wide made him a tiny, informal curtsey, like a blown flower.

"There, hasn't she delightful manners?" said his mother fondly, but speaking rather as if Hansi were a child too young to understand. "Sit down, darling, I haven't seen anything of dear Dr. John or Captain Pam for hours, and really it is rather a change though I can't imagine what they're up to. I knew you'd be off at four and rather too tired for tea, so I've told Paul to bring a bottle of champagne. Much more healthy and refreshing. Do you drink champagne, Hansi?"

"At home," said Hansi, "we are having nothing else all the days."

"How very nice," said the Countess on a note of envy. "This dear girl is from Austria, Peter. Isn't it a coincidence? —her mother was a Countess just like me. That horrid old Hitler killed her and the Count, too. Counts never seem to be very lucky or bring other people much luck. But Hansi's very brave about it all, and it all happened long ago, just like my poor Count. She's been telling me wonderful stories of court life before the war. Talk about Tales from the Vienna Woods!"

"It was nothing," said Hansi, blushing modestly. "Only small things of childhood just to entertain your mother, Herr Peter."

"How pretty that sounds," said the Countess, "but you must call him Peter in the English way."

"That I shall like," said Hansi, and she flashed him a smile.
"Peter, he's a fine name."

"For a fine fellow?" said the Countess.

"Oh, my, yes!" Hansi agreed with her small, hushed laugh.

"Dear children," sighed the Countess sentimentally. "I suppose it's thinking of the Blue Danube and all those waltzes." She spoke at some length of waltzes and dance music in general, breaking off only to tell Paul when he appeared with the wine to bring another bottle as there were three of them and this was an occasion. "To Vienna!" she said, draining her glass and re-filling it. She hummed "The Blue Danube." Hansi was thirsty, too. She was a most charming and adaptable girl, for she seemed quite happy to let the Countess run on just as Simon did, whilst she talked silently with Simon on other subjects though never a word was spoken. She had most eloquent eyes. In fact her whole face and body were eloquent.

"Do tell us more about your lovely country, Hansi," said the Countess presently.

"I remember when we go to the Worthersee to my father's castle there," said Hansi, "then we are swimming in the lake which has hot springs in it and is warm even though there is snow on all those mountains."

"Swimming—!" said the Countess. "How I loved it as a girl. . . ."

Hansi and Simon were free to go on with their private conversation which wasn't about swimming. Neither did either of them bother to refer to their talk last night when Hansi had been a waitress. With the wine and the sun and the sky and in such good company little details didn't matter.

VII

Into the monastic calm of the fo'c'sle Spike had brought another of his scandalous news bulletins from that other exotic, seething, crowded, scented world. Now, however, he dealt with the particular rather than the general.

"Oh, boy! Oh, baby!" he rejoiced. "Is she a peach? Course she's the little dark one, Simon. You must have noticed her. She sticks out a mile from the rest. Black and smooth as a seal

out at the Zoo. Eyes like a seal, come to that—brown and big and soft. A Russian she is, or rather used to be. Her grandfather was a Prince, but the Bolsheviks slung him out. They've been living in Paree since—oo-la-la! A French-Russian, get it? Course she knows plenty, and she knows a real man when she sees one—meaning me. I'm the little Lord Mud I am to Zaza, and I can take it. I thought I knew something about girls, but that shows what a mug I was. A bloke doesn't know nothing until he's had some catch-as-catch-can with Zaza. Cor blimey! Stiffen the crows!"

The cards had been laid aside to hear his tidings. Abinger and Briggs regarded Spike with envy and interest and swore over his luck in a reverent way. Simon was pleased that his friend was having a happy time. Only Mr. Meggsy, reading his Bible in the lower bunk, made no sign.

"I say, Simon," said Spike, suddenly alarmed, "just because I've blown the gaff don't you come butting in."

"Not me," Simon promised readily.

"If you feel like a bit of a flutter there's quite a classy piece who'd fall like a ripe plum for the owner's son," said Spike. "Very hoity-toity. I'll admit she took my eye a bit at first, but she slapped my face good and hearty so it was just as well I tumbled for Zaza. She doesn't go round slapping faces. She's a real lady. But this other piece—she thinks she's the Queen or something. Mind you, she's not half bad if you like blondes. Name of Hansi. Course the Doc and old Pam are fair barmy about her."

"Are they?" said Simon.

"Give you the horrors to see them," said Spike. "Two dirty old men old enough to be her father, or grandpa, comes to that. You know how they've always been at each other's throats? Well, blimey, they was friends before Hansi come along. And as usual they're so busy watching each other, and crueling each other's pitches, that they're getting no place. Course, Simon, you could sail in and get off with that bird right under their noses. And I'd like to see you do it. Get you out of my way, for one thing, and for another she's too good for either of those swipes, even though she did slap me bang across the kisser when I offered to help with her brassiere like a steward should. But you as the owner's son—that'd be right

up her alley. She's a bit of a snob, that Hansi. And the way you have with the dames, you couldn't go wrong."

"Thanks for the tip, Spike," said Simon. "I must look out for Hansi."

"You can't miss her and you couldn't do better," said Spike. His face grew dreamy. "'Member that song, 'Black Eyes'?" He hummed it. "That's Zaza."

Mr. Meggsy closed his Bible and spoke.

"Zaza—bah!" he said.

Mr. Meggsy, the chief engineer, dwelt apart and aloof. He had two loves, his motors and his Book. His ears were always listening with fond attention to the song of the one; his eyes in his leisure hours were devoted to the other. A square, quiet block of a man, like an ingot of metal, he was respected and feared. His eyes were grey and thoughtful, his head was bald and domed, and his brows stuck out bushily. On occasion he revealed that he had been a great sinner in the green folly of his youth. Now he had put away such things and concentrated on the realities: the motors and the Bible. A man knew where he was with them, they were worthwhile and all sufficient.

And yet everyone liked him. He didn't mind if others used bad language and strong waters and tobacco. They were still in their green folly, and he believed they would grow out of such nonsense in due time. Simon admired Mr. Meggsy. There was a whole world of difference between him and the only other religious person Simon had ever encountered: his father, Mr. Smith of The Pheasant. There was nothing sour and bent and cruel about Mr. Meggsy.

In view of all this when Mr. Meggsy voiced his opinion about Zaza it made quite an impression. Around that bare, wooden table they had discussed many girls and many things with the greatest candour, and it was only once in a blue moon that the chief put his oar in. All eyes turned on him.

"This yacht," Mr. Meggsy went on in slow, level tones, "has always been a pest-ship full of rogues and fools. The wonder is the Lord hasn't sent her to the bottom. Perhaps He has respect for the few decent folk and the lovely job of her motors. If I were you, young Spike, I'd steer clear of your Zaza and all the rest of the rabble. There's no good in it, and

you're fouling your own nest. I am an engineer, and that's where all my interest lies, but things are much amiss aboard here—and more so than ever now—and maybe the time has come when something should be done. As to that, we shall see."

He didn't say it like a preacher, but his words were impressive. The younger men continued to stare at him. There were goings-on in the *Stormalong*, of course, but they had come to take that for granted. Everybody knew that people in millionaires' yachts were crazy as coots and up to all sorts of fun and games. That was part of the job and a lot of the fun.

"But Mr. Meggsy," Spike protested, "Zaza's a great kid, and a real lady."

Mr. Meggsy had said his say, and he reopened the Bible only to close it again, and sit up sharply, his head cocked on one side, listening intently. Then he flung back the sheet, and just as he was he made for the small door which led to the engine room. Even as he did so the motors stopped. Instinct had warned him that they were going to. The door closed behind him.

"Oh, heck!" said Abinger, and hastily draining his mug, followed the chief.

"Well, I'm damned," said Spike.

At sea you grew so accustomed to the steady beat of the motors that the ear and mind accepted them as part of life. You didn't notice the sound and the throb any more than you noticed your own breathing. But now that they had broken off like that the effect was startling. A great hush fell, and the yacht died. The song of the sea which came in through the ports dwindled down and down and stopped. Only little lapping noises now, mere whispers. No shore sounds to fill the void, as there would have been in port.

"Creepy, ain't it?" said Spike. "Better get on topside."

Apparently that was the general feeling. The deck was crowded with airily-clad figures. Everybody was asking questions, and nobody was answering. There were shocked squeals, which didn't sound very genuine, when the Displaced Persons looked down through the open skylight into the engine room where Mr. Meggsy, entirely unaware of an audience, was engrossed in his precious charges which had failed him in

such an unprecedented fashion.

The moon rode high and set the sea a-glitter. Now that the *Stormalong* lay numb and still there wasn't a breath of breeze. The air was heavy and soft and hot. It seemed to press down on the yacht.

Simon found himself alone, for Spike, he guessed, had gone in quest of Zaza.

He wondered where Hansi was, and worked his way through silken-clad throng in search of her. Amidships he found Captain Pamphillion and Dr. John, and from force of habit joined them. They were part of the *Stormalong*, and all these others were only guests.

"It may be awkward if Meggsy can't get his infernal engines started again," Captain Pamphillion was booming above the shrill chatter. "Strange though it may seem in a sea like the Mediterranean we're in a pocket between any of the trade routes where we might stay for any length of time. We're not provisioned or watered for that. Damn bad luck if our white cargo died on us, eh, Dr. John?" His laugh was hearty but not very happy. "Ah, Peter, my boy, so you too are astir?"

"A good thing your mother isn't," said Dr. John. "This would upset dear Hilda, and since she's been so generous and hospitable that's the last thing we want. Fortunately, as it turns out, she complained of feeling restless to-night, and I gave her a sleeping draught. It was rather against my principles, but there is a time when exceptions must be made, particularly with such a patient. It is good to think of her resting sound."

"Yes," said Simon.

The noise of all the girlish voices had suddenly coalesced into a kind of chant. In many tongues they demanded something, but neither Simon nor his companions knew what. Suddenly a slender figure stood on the rail further aft and dived with a cool splash into the sparkling sea.

The nearest thing to a cheer which feminine throats could raise went up, and at that moment Hansi appeared before them in a cobweb of nightgown and her hair.

"The girls say it is so hot they must swim," she said. "You had better have the ropes and ladders or they drown. See, here go I."

She poised on the rail and went over.

For all his simplicity Simon could feel the interest of Dr. John and Captain Pam. They had each enjoyed the moment, and yet they remembered to remind him of their warnings with confidential jabs of the elbows in his ribs.

"That girl!" said Dr. John on a note of strong disapproval.

"That Hansi!" said Captain Pamphillion.

The infection spread. Everywhere Displaced Persons were taking to the water as if the *Stormalong* were about to sink. But this was no panic. This was fine fun, and everyone was happy.

"It wouldn't do if any of them did drown, poor souls," said Dr. John.

"No, indeed," said Captain Pam, and he called Caleb from the wheelhouse and hustled away.

The short accommodation ladder was lowered, and Captain Pam and Caleb were busy throwing ropes and lifebuoys. Dr. John and Simon watched the busy scene with interest.

"You don't swim, Peter?"

"No," said Simon.

"A great pity. Everybody should learn—particularly if they travel in yachts. And yet who am I to preach?—I don't swim either."

"Does Captain Pam know that?" asked Simon idly, his eyes more occupied than his ears.

"I know he can't swim a stroke anyway," said Dr. John, and chuckled. "And yet perhaps it's a good thing you're not in there with all those Displaced Persons. There is one, remember, who isn't. She might seize the opportunity to take advantage of you, not realizing that Hilda is quite out. And believe me, my dear boy, once a menace like Hansi gets after you, a decent, simple soul like yourself doesn't stand much chance."

"I rather wish I could swim all the same," said Simon.

He could see Hansi. She looked very like the mermaid he had briefly imagined her to be, quite at home, flashing and gleaming. But, of course, she had done lots of swimming in the Worthersee, whether from her father's castle or the hotel where she had been a waitress.

Spike's Cockney voice came shrill but far off. He was well

away from the yacht, on the outskirts of the school of bathing beauties.

"Come on in, Simon," called Spike. "The water's fine. Come on in and meet Zaza."

"Can't swim," called Simon. "Worse luck!"

He saw Spike's head and a head very like a seal's. They were close together and Spike was laughing.

Hansi appeared immediately below, treading water, gazing up, her hair like seaweed floating golden on the silver surface.

"Peter, you don't swim?" she called. "Come!—I teach you. I don't ever let you drown."

"You see?" rasped Dr. John. "I warned you!" He wasn't at all pleased at the thought of Simon joining Hansi down there in the warm Mediterranean.

Simon wished he had the Irishman's rubber tube, and wondered what had happened to it. Without it he was a land-bound creature—a villager from Royals Bottom where they had only a duck pond. He shook his head. Dr. John stepped forward and leaned over to make sure that Hansi didn't make any further attempt to lure the owner's son. Or, at least, that was what he meant to convey to Simon, who smiled.

Hansi splashed Dr. John with a shower of silver drops, laughed her little laugh, and retreated into the modesty of distance.

Dr. John gave a little dry sigh of regret.

A voice whispered hoarsely in Simon's ear, "Now's the chance to show 'em my tattooing."

Caleb moved on towards the bows. A moment later there was a resounding crash. Apparently he wasn't much of a diver.

The carnival went on, and from down below in the hot engine room came the tinkle of hammer and metal as the seriously-minded slaves of the machines did their best to get the *Stormalong* on her way again.

Though merely a spectator Simon found the strange scene well worthy of attention. He had never seen so many girls before all shining and vague and dim in the water. The sea had sometimes struck him as rather empty and dull. This was much better than watching porpoises. And as for Hansi, there was time enough.

They didn't see Hansi any more. She must have climbed

aboard by a rope down near the stern, whilst their attention was on other matters. Simon could feel that Dr. John and Captain Pam were anxious about her and disappointed. He was neither. She would be all right.

Gradually the Displaced Persons found they had had enough, and came out, shaking themselves like puppies, still chattering and giggling. They went below, showering salt water, to dry on whatever they could find. Simon knew they wouldn't do his mother's carpets and linen much good, but it didn't matter when you had all the money in the world.

Captain Pamphillion blew his whistle and shouted an order.

Spike and Zaza made a good job of recovering the life-buoys.

CHAPTER SIX

I

WITH no breeze to rustle the beautiful curtains, with the *Stormalong* lifeless and numb as a log, the sitting-room seemed even staler than it had on the previous morning, even though the stale scent wasn't so noticeable and there was no smell of the Countess's pink cigarettes. The tantalus remained empty. Impressions of wet bottoms were printed in salty outline on the fabric of the cushions and footprints marked the carpet.

Simon, arriving for breakfast, found the table unlaid and the place empty, but as he paused at a loss the door to the inner cabin opened and Dr. John flitted out, a stethoscope hanging round his neck, the cord held between his pointed shoulders. He wore his best professional manner, and, having closed the door with his customary care, he came tiptoeing to Simon on his little feet, clawlike hands held out open before him.

"Peter," he said, "your mother's in a bad way."

The news caused Simon real distress.

"How do you mean? She was all right yesterday."

"Many people are 'all right yesterday' and die to-day, Peter."

"You mean," said Simon, and he spoke with most unusual anger, "that you gave her an overdose of that stuff last night?"

Dr. John's hands thrust the suggestion away.

"My dear Peter, if there had been the shadow of such a possibility do you think I should have mentioned it to you in the presence of that disgusting Pamphillion last night? Come, you may think what you like of me, but I wouldn't have you write me down an utter fool."

"No," Simon admitted, "you are not an utter fool."

"To be absolutely frank, Peter, it's her heart. Living the life she has, putting such a strain on that vital organ, a sudden collapse of this kind was almost inevitable. I have done my best to stave it off, but there is a limit to what all the skill and medical wisdom in the world can accomplish. Your mother, to be blunt, may, as she would express it, pass on at any time."

Simon looked and felt quite desolate. He couldn't imagine life and the *Stormalong* without the Countess. In spite of everything she was the centre and heart of his big, wide world.

"That, however, is the mortal lot," Dr. John resumed, more briskly. "Death comes to us all, and your mother has had a very full life. I don't think any of us can feel that the best lies ahead for her. And so we must be resigned, and take all steps that are necessary to make her passing seemly and proper."

"But she's still full of beans," said Simon, "and enjoying life more than most in her own way. Anyway, Dr. John, what steps can we take?"

Dr. John looked down at his pointed shoes for a moment, and linked his hands in front of him. Then he raised his head and goggled straight at Simon with his round, bat's eyes.

"Your mother is a very wealthy woman, Peter," he said. "Very, very wealthy. I was shocked to learn just now that she hasn't made a will."

"Oh," said Simon, "is that all?"

"All?" gasped Dr. John. "All? Oh, you simpleton, don't you grasp what that means?"

"No," Simon confessed.

"My dear boy, I sometimes think you're not of this harsh and ruthless world at all. You dwell in the clouds. Don't you see what will happen if your mother isn't persuaded to make a will?"

"No," Simon said again.

"I would pray for patience, if I chanced to believe in prayers," said Dr. John, doing a brief dance. "My dear Peter, all her millions would go to the lawyers and a swarm of distant relations who've never raised a finger for her. There would be lawsuits and endless bother, and meanwhile those of us who mean most to her would be out in the cold, penniless, dispossessed, cut off. I, who have abandoned everything to serve her—I should be left without a brass farthing, whilst some

worthless woman in Bath or some young nincompoop in Mayfair, having won the expensive battle in the courts, would come into what was left."

He paused, peeping up anxiously. Simon nearly remained silent, but since the little man seemed so eager for him to speak he said, consolingly, "At least, Captain Pamphillion wouldn't get anything."

Dr. John saw his point immediately.

"Exactly! Exactly!" he agreed, rasping his hands. "There's comfort there. But we can't live on comfort. Oh, I grant you, Peter, that thought would solace me a great deal. Captain Pam doesn't deserve a cent. He's robbed her right and left, he killed the Count and Wilson, he's been up to all kinds of devilry, including getting all these girls aboard, but we mustn't cut off our nose to spite our face. You, her beloved son, and I, who have kept her alive by my skill and attention—we are nearest and dearest to her in all the world. This is the moment I have been preparing you for all along when I have urged that we must stand together. You wouldn't be alive to-day, I may tell you, if we hadn't. You would have followed the Count and Wilson long since. Who knows? The Countess herself might have followed them. So now I say, Peter, in all sincerity and laying my cards on the table, that this is the hour when we are entitled to reap our harvest."

Simon considered for a space.

"You mean you want me to persuade her to make a will in our favour?" he inquired, for that was the way it appeared to him.

Dr. John leapt into the air in righteous fury, but his voice was still hushed when he spoke again.

"Great God, no!" he said, forgetting in the emotion of the moment to add any qualifying clause. "I am shocked, I am shattered, Peter, to find you capable of even thinking such a thing. For crying out loud," he demanded, his professional manner breaking down under the strain, "what kind of a louse do you think I am?"

As Simon didn't know he could say nothing, and stood silent, considering Dr. John. As ever Dr. John was baffled and alarmed. He drooped, hunching his pointed shoulders; he held out his tiny empty hands.

"Peter," he said, "forgive me for being angry. If you think a moment you will understand why I was upset. You are an honest boy, and clean as a whistle. You love your mother. All I am suggesting is that you see that she does what she herself would wish—the right and the just thing. I am in a difficult position as her medical adviser. With you it is quite otherwise: To her you are her long lost son, and I truly believe you feel that you are. You can guide her in this hour. I go further—it is your duty to do so. May I count on you?"

Simon didn't break his silence in a hurry. He thought about all this, as a son in his position had every right to do.

"Why, yes, Dr. John," he said at last, "you can count on me to do my duty."

Dr. John suddenly grasped Simon's big hand in his claw and wrung it in a dry and bony grip.

"Thank you, Peter," he said. "I've always known you and I were a team that would take the hell of a lot of beating. Go in to your mother, Peter. I shall not come with you so great is my trust. Only get her to make that Goddam will the way it should be made and I'll know I did the right thing in saving your life when you were fished out of the sea. Never forget that, Peter. Even apart from Captain Pam, you wouldn't have been alive to-day but for me."

"Of course no one could forget a thing like that," said Simon. "And now I think I'll go in and see mother."

Dr. John looked unhappy as he always did when Simon referred to the Countess in such a natural and affectionate way. It was almost as if he was frightened and nonplussed by the simplicity which he found so delightful. However, he put a good face on things and with a gracious wave gave the right of entry.

"Do, Peter, do," he said. "At this hour she needs your honesty and sound advice."

The inner cabin felt even more hushed and numb than the rest of the yacht. Dark curtains were drawn and the light was dim, but Simon saw that his mother looked ill and old. It was, however, the first time he had seen her without her mask of make-up and he made allowances for that. She gave him a wan smile and signed him to a chair with a weak gesture. Her dimples did not play; her doll's eyes lacked their brightness.

"Did Dr. John send you in, darling?" she asked.

"Yes, mother."

"Are you in league with him, my dear?"

"Lord, no, mother! Why ever should I be? How do you feel?"

"Stinking," said the Countess. "He's killing me by slow poisoning, you know."

"Mother, you don't really think . . . ?"

"I don't think anything, Peter—I know. My feet and hands are icy cold—the extremities, you know; they're always mentioned in cases like this. My heart is fluttering, and my stomach's sick. I don't think it's a nice way to be murdered."

"But, mother, why should Dr. John murder you?" asked Simon.

"It comes back to the root of all evil, Peter—my money. He's after that. He always has been. Everyone except you always has been. Bingo, Wilson, all of them!—thought I don't think dear Mary Jane was. He's been pestering me to make a will."

"I don't see what good that can do him," Simon reasoned. "If you know he's killing you you wouldn't be likely to leave him much."

"Ah," said the Countess, "that's just it—he doesn't know I know. He's smarming all over me, explaining how I owe my life to him, and how he's the only one who can help me now. He thinks I'm crazy, and as I know I am, that makes it all very difficult." She sighed. "See how clever he is. He wants me to pass on at sea, and so he's done something to the machinery and we're stuck here."

Simon turned this over.

"It hadn't struck me, mother, but of course he may have."

"All those wheels and things have kept turning round and round until Dr. John needed more time. Then they stopped. If you think that's only bad luck for me and good luck for him you're a mug, my lamb. It's just the kind of idea that would appeal to him."

Simon nodded.

"Wouldn't it be simplest to make a will, mother, and be done with it? He needn't see it, need he?"

"He'd get it out of me somehow, Peter. People stop at nothing. And if he didn't he'd guess he wasn't in it, and then

he'd want revenge. Look at the way poor Mary Jane was murdered because they thought I was getting too fond of her." Simon, naturally, didn't correct his mother on a point of fact. "The only marvel to me is that they haven't done you in long ago, darling."

"It is rather a marvel, mother," said Simon. "I think they know I'm so simple that they're not afraid of me. Perhaps they feel I may be more useful alive than dead. But getting back to the will, mother—supposing you did make one, not leaving Dr. John anything, then he wouldn't have any purpose in killing you just now. He'd want to keep you alive in the hope you might change your mind later on and make a new one."

The Countess looked quite surprised at her son's sagacity.

"You've got something there, babe," she said, with a return to her more normal self. "Suppose I left everything to you? No, that wouldn't do. They'd be so angry it would be the signal for you to disappear. Oh, dear, it is a nuisance! And feeling as I do I really shouldn't be bothered. If I'm dying I might expect a little peace. Still, I'm not a gonner yet, and I'll figure out some way to make saps of them. Poor crazy old Hilda might pull a fast one." She recovered her deep chuckle. "That would be fun and games."

"Yes, mother," said Simon, feeling more cheerful himself.

A commanding rap, and Captain Pamphillion filled the doorway. The seafarer wore an air of rugged concern, and he stepped in with the manner of one who has come to take charge in a crisis.

"Hilda," he said briskly, "what's up?"

"I don't know, dear Captain Pam, but I feel foul."

The Captain pressed his brow, as was his way when thinking hard. He crossed and studied the Countess. He pressed his brow again.

"Feel cold in the extremities? Pains in the heart? Stomach upset?"

"Yes, Captain Pam," sighed the Countess, and at this naming of her symptoms a spasm crossed her face.

Captain Pamphillion drew himself up, a fine figure of a man of action, fearless, dependable.

"I am the master of this yacht, and at sea my word is law.

Still, you are the owner, Hilda, and out of courtesy and regard I must consult your wishes. My duty seems quite clear, though it isn't easy. Have I your permission, Hilda, to detain Dr. John in his cabin until we reach Alexandria? I'll log him on some other charge. Leave that to me. I might for instance have to take the action on account of his behaviour towards a certain Displaced Person. I could think up something. Have no fears."

"I'm sure you would, dear Captain Pam," said the Countess, and Simon shared her belief.

"This breakdown suits his book admirably," Captain Pam discovered. "He may have contrived it. The man is dangerous enough for anything. I know that. In Alexandria we can get proper medical advice. Until then I don't think he should have access to you. Or to anyone else for that matter. A mad dog at large is a menace."

"You're very sweet and considerate, Captain Pam," said the Countess, "but the only trouble is, supposing he's not poisoning me?"

Captain Pam didn't care for the matter being put quite so bluntly as that. He frowned and gave the impression of one startled by such a suggestion.

"I don't quite follow, Hilda?"

"What I mean is, I may just be really sick, and in that case if we're going to be stuck here for ages, I might die if I didn't have medical care. You wouldn't like me to do that, would you, Captain Pam?"

"Dear lady! Hilda!" boomed Captain Pam, shocked to the marrow.

"So you see I'm between the devil and the deep blue sea as usual," said the Countess. "I think we'd better take the charitable view and assume for the moment that dear Dr. John's on the up and up."

"Perhaps so," said Captain Pam most reluctantly.

"It wouldn't be fair to lock him up, and he'd be ever so cross. Besides, plague or something is almost sure to break out among those horrid Depressed People. Then where should we be? He might stage one of those sit-down strikes. I remember in Paris once . . ."

The Captain didn't mind the long digression. He had plenty to think about.

"My husband, the actor one you know, Peter, was furious, but there you are. I don't think it would be wise to make dear Dr. John furious. In fact it might be dangerous. I'll be very careful of anything he gives me to drink—in fact it might be a good idea if I asked him to try it first—and we'll just hope for the best. I think I'll sleep for a while now, but very soon I must see about making my will."

"Will?" said Captain Pam, repeating the word so sharply that it rang like a revolver shot.

"Dr. John thinks mother should," said Simon.

"Does he now? Does he?" Captain Pam pressed his brow again, and thus shielding his face shot a glance at Simon which warned him that they must stand together against this villainous poisoner.

"He's most insistent."

"He would be! I agree, however, that perhaps a will would be a wise step in view of your great wealth, Hilda. But I say this quite frankly, dear lady, if Dr. John benefits by it I wouldn't give you a penny for your chances of seeing Alexandria. And there could be no post mortem, remember, on a body buried at sea."

"Oh, how horrid!" cried the Countess weakly. "You wouldn't bury me at sea, would you?"

Captain Pamphillion was weighing many things.

"That would depend," he said, speaking to himself rather than the Countess. "We might have to."

"Oh dear," said the Countess, "and yet I suppose I should be with Bingo and Wilson. And now if you two dear men . . ."

She signed to Simon to kiss her. Her brow was hot.

"You're going to be all right, mother," he said.

"Fit as a fiddle," said Captain Pamphillion heartily. "Forewarned is forearmed. Peter and I will see that little rat doesn't harm you. For two pins I'd have him overboard. It would be drumhead justice if he followed his two other victims before he had a chance to make another killing. Get some rest now, Hilda, and put all your confidence in us."

"I shall, and Oh, thank you," said the Countess, and turned on her side, groaning a little as she did so.

In the alleyway outside the suite Captain Pamphillion made

sure they were alone, drew Simon closer, and pursed his lips as he did when he intended to mute his sailorly boom.

"I'm no doctor," he said. "If it comes to that I don't think he is. But if you want my opinion your mother's having a bad bilious attack. She ate two lobsters and drank a bottle of Scotch last night. That's why she couldn't sleep. You've got to hand it to that rat—he's cunning and quick. He's seizing the chance to scare her to death, and put her more than ever in his debt. He'll save her life, you see. But we've done a splendid job of work this morning. Talk about hoist with his own petard! There couldn't be a better moment for making that will. We must keep her up to it whilst she still thinks he's poisoning her. This, dear boy, is where we really do cash in. And once it's all down in black and white the sooner something happens to poor Hilda the better. Women are changeable, Peter—changeable and fickle."

"I see," said Simon.

Captain Pamphillion gave him a jolly smack on the shoulder.

"I told you to play ball on my side, Peter," he said. "You're a wise fellow and a lucky one. Between us we'll scoop the kitty and there's millions in it . . ."

II

The *Stormalong*, smaller than ever in immobility, drifted on the dark waters, a match-stick under the immense sweep of star-hung heavens. Save for navigation lights and the twin red lamps at her masthead which proclaimed her disability, she might have been abandoned, a derelict. Everyone was not asleep, however. Simple Simon had the morning watch, which had started at 4 a.m. No need now to turn the wheel or watch the restless compass. His duties were nominal—those of a look-out. He was there by Captain Pamphillion's orders, and he did not mind at all, though Captain Pam might have. Simon was not alone. He had the very best of company.

The clock showed twenty to five. Simon made one bell ten minutes late. That didn't matter, however. There was no one to hear the golden sound, or no one to whom ten minutes mattered.

Hansi had climbed up on the stool in the corner.

"Ooof," she said like a child out of breath, patting her heart, "what a lot can happen then in so little time and yet there isn't any time at all."

Her laugh was hushed and happy and rich.

Simon hoisted himself on to the chart table beside her, and put his arm about her. It was not a conventional position for a quartermaster, but he could see just as well from there as anywhere and the circumstances were unusual.

"I like you a lot, Hansi," he said, and he bent over and kissed the top of her glimmering head.

Hansi nestled closer.

"That I think I know, Peter," she said. "It is nice this to know. I am in love to you. And you to me, yes?"

"Hansi, lovely Hansi," said Simon. Her shoulder was like the petal of a tea-rose. Earlier she had been swimming. The breath of the sea lingered on her.

"I think I tell you something, Peter," she said in a sleepy, dreamy murmur. "I am not what you think I am—not one of those Displaced Persons."

"Is that so, Hansi?" asked Simon, as if nobody had ever hinted such a thing before.

"No, mine lover," said Hansi. "That is all an idea so that we get away in the English milady's yacht. Now I tell you what we really are : We are a company of the theatre who are stranded in Monaco and must get to Egypt to fill engagements but we don't have no money." Though Simon in his simple way hadn't been bothering his head about them, many things were explained: the silks and stockings, the perfumes and the gaiety, the make-up. "So that is how it is all fixed then with those two men, the Herr Captain and the Herr Doctor. They say they can bamboozle—bamboozle is right?—"

"Yes," said Simon.

"—Bamboozle—it is a funny word—the English milady because they are good men, and have charity on us. I think they are great liars, those two. I think they get money from our manager, and I think they try to make us pay our fares, too, but not with money."

Simon was pleased to find that Hansi was an actress. In the

old life they had been very far off, but glamourous and wonderful creatures. Apparently most close at hand they remained so. He was interested naturally in this gossip, and amused to think of Dr. John and Captain Pam in this new light. Somehow it was very difficult to imagine them being interested in any woman other than the Countess. They had seemed to have such one-track minds.

"They don't give me any of the peace," Hansi went on, "and the more I smack and punch at them and speak hard words then the more they are after me. There is only one way I keep me to myself. I make each jealous of that other, and then they are so busy guarding that I get a little rest."

Simon gave her a hug.

"That's the way to handle them, Hansi, and the more you can make Dr. John hate Captain Pam and t'other way round the better."

"That I shall do, mine lover," said Hansi, snuggling her face against his chest. "I am thinking it is very nice in this boat," she went on after a time. "Here it would be fine to stay. Who knows? In Egypt all might not be so well. And in Egypt there isn't you."

The idea of losing Hansi so soon, particularly at such a moment, wasn't at all attractive. Simon's hold tightened. He had no desire to let her go.

"What a pity you can't do massage, Hansi."

"But that I can do if nothing else," she laughed, knowing she could do many things very well. "In Austria all the girls are taught the massage at school."

"Fine!" said Simon. "I don't see why you shouldn't be my mother's companion and stay on. You'd be much nicer than Mary Jane."

"Mary Jane?—did you love her?"

"No," said Simon, "she wasn't that sort. She left us a while back. If you like I could suggest—"

"Better not you, mine Peter. Leave to me this. Already I am making your mother like me. She is not very right in the head, and her I can handle. I have told her many fine lies and she believes them. She is one who makes you want to lie, and likes

it when you do. Very soon I shall be her companion and then we shall be together always."

An attractive prospect, and yet Simon experienced a pang. Always was a long time, and much as he liked Hansi just then, life in the wide world was so full of surprises and interesting new people that he had no wish to surrender any of his new-won freedom. Even Hansi might prove a tie. However, there was no need to worry. For the present it was a good arrangement, and to-morrow could take care of itself.

"If she is asking those two," said Hansi, "they will speak up for me. Neither does want that I should go."

Simon agreed. He saw that Dr. John and Captain Pam would find Hansi a delightful solution of the problem of a companion with qualifications even higher than those of the candidates each had championed previously. If Hansi proved a success she might find her job rather perilous, but despite her pretty and innocent ways, Hansi was an actress and therefore a woman of the world. She would be able to look after herself, and when either of them laid their cards on the table and sought her as an ally she would be much more equal to the occasion than a mere villager such as he.

Dawn came suddenly, tinging the east with grey and pearl and rose.

"I must run off fast," Hansi said, jumping down. "If the Herr Doctor or the Herr Captain should find us now, then they might not think that I am so good for the companion. For this I go quick, but oh, great gracious, with the love for you, mine Peter."

She went so quick that her hair floated out behind her like a cape caught in the wind.

Simon glanced at the clock, and struck three bells. He had missed two bells altogether, but that had been of no consequence to the sleeping world or the pair who'd been awake. Simon stepped out on deck to greet the morning. He stretched and expanded his chest. The cool air of that early hour bathed his skin. He hitched up his borrowed shorts, and lit a cigarette. Life was good. A gull, white and free and far wandering, hovered above, looking down at him with bright and friendly eyes as if it recognized a kindred soul.

III

The condition of the Countess gave cause for grave concern. Still allowing for the fact that she wore no make-up, her skin had a peculiar green tinge. If she wasn't being poisoned she looked as if she were, or had persuaded herself she was. Simon, so seldom worried about anything, was distressed now. His mother had given him the wide world and unimagined pleasures: he was grateful to her from the depths of his simple soul. He glanced at Dr. John, at Captain Pamphillion, on either side of him by the bed. Much as he knew of them by now he couldn't believe it. Surely all their plots and counter-plots were only a kind of game? Surely even they couldn't mean this dear, silly old lady any harm? If they did they deserved to go overboard too.

"Hilda, you sent for us?" said Dr. John.

"Dearest lady?" said Captain Pamphillion.

"Mother?" said Simon.

The Countess raised herself up on her pillows and smiled wanly.

"Dr. John," she said, "I want to discuss this important matter of my will. I've arranged for Paul to bring me a drop of brandy. Don't you think that would be a good idea?"

Dr. John looked even graver, and then he shrugged.

"A little stimulant?" he said. "Why not? Strychnine—brandy—it comes to the same thing, almost."

"Strychnine?" said Captain Pamphillion, swinging about and gazing down at Dr. John in horror.

"In small quantities, most helpful, Captain Pam," said Dr. John smoothly. "Not being a medical man, you wouldn't understand."

"I'm a plain fellow with no trimmings," said Captain Pam. "The word gave me a turn, I must admit. It's been in my mind."

"And why, Captain Pam?"

"Poison, Dr. John," said the Captain, bluntly, briefly and with significance.

The Countess moaned a little.

Captain Pam snatched up a medicine glass and sniffed it.

Dr. John smiled.

"I know you've absolutely no sense of smell, Captain Pam," he said. "Besides, is it likely—?" Dr. John shrugged over the silliness of laymen.

Paul entered with the tray, and placed it by the bedside. As usual he showed nice judgment. There were glasses for four. Apparently this was another occasion.

"Thank you, Paul, you darling," said the Countess with warmth.

For a moment interest was diverted from the sufferer to the steward. Dr. John, who had not chosen him, peered keenly at the handsome young man, and even Captain Pam, who had, considered him in a strange way. For a moment the spirit of poor Wilson seemed to hover over the cabin. But Paul was all unaware, and he didn't appear to find anything odd in the Countess's use of darling. He made his bow and left them. Simon smiled to himself. There was no need to weigh up Paul's qualifications as a stepfather. He wouldn't live to be one—or not aboard the *Stormalong*.

"Paul's such a sweet young man," said the Countess, as it were pushing him a few inches on his journey towards the side. "I don't think I've ever met one more helpful and obliging. And much above his station. His family are really aristocrats. One of his forefathers was guillotined by those horrible Revolutionaries."

"I think, my dear Hilda," said Dr. John, "we can afford to take that with a pinch of salt."

For once Captain Pam was in agreement.

"A lot of bosh," he boomed. "I know all about him. Took good care to find out. His people have been humble fishermen for generations. I'm afraid the young fellow's a liar. He'll need watching."

Dr. John jerked his head in warmest assent.

"Fishermen?" said the Countess, helping herself to another brandy whilst lost in a new chain of thought conjured up by the word. "I remember one year at San Remo there was a fisherman. He was a superb creature with a wonderful voice. He used to sing songs under my window in the moonlight. Ah, I was young then. And yet it seems—"

"Dear lady," said Captain Pam solicitously, "you're much better at the moment. The brandy's bucking you up. Don't you think this is a splendid opportunity to clear up the business of your will? We understood that was why you'd sent for us."

"The will?" said the Countess, returning reluctantly from romantic San Remo. "Ah, yes, the will! There's no trouble about that. Dear Paul brought me my pen and paper, and I've drawn it up. Your poor father, Peter—and what a business man he was!—always said that the simpler and shorter a will was the better. He'd be proud of this will of mine if he could see it. Who knows? Perhaps he can." She drew a long envelope from beneath her pillow, and took out a sheet of thick and expensive paper, folded so that only the bottom of the page showed. This was blank and virginal save for the words:

"Signed in my presence.

"Witness:

"Witness:"

This, though practical, wasn't very informative.

The Countess reached out for her golden fountain-pen. "All I have to do now is to sign." She looked very proud of herself. "For a sick old woman aren't I being businesslike?" she inquired. "I really do think, Peter, your dear father must be acting as my spirit-guide."

It was very odd to think that millions depended on that single sheet which she held in her chubby hand—one of those extremities which were feeling cold. Dr. John and Captain Pamphillion had to lean forward to look at it more closely. It was as if, in their friendly interest, they hoped to read the hidden writing, but the Countess naturally could afford good paper and its quality baffled them.

"Now who will be witnesses?" asked the Countess quite like her old self momentarily. She spoke as if they were playing some round game, and inadvertently picked up her glass instead of the pen. "What about my two oldest and dearest friends, you Dr. John, and you Captain Pam?"

This very natural suggestion had a queer effect on both. They started back and shook their heads; their hands went up in protest, refusing the honour. Simon, being far from a lawyer, might have been puzzled if it hadn't been for an historic event at Royals Bottom which was still discussed almost nightly at

The Pheasant. Back in 1940, Mrs. Briggs had been left £13 10s. by an old crony and the legacy had turned out to be illegal because she had witnessed the will. Simon doubted whether Dr. John or Captain Pam had heard of this particular incident, but the same thing might have happened elsewhere.

"Dear lady," boomed Captain Pam, "I'm only an old sea-dog but something tells me it would be more seemly if you chose as a witness someone—well—less intimately associated with you."

"Precisely! Precisely!" chimed Dr. John. "You know the saying, Hilda, 'an impartial witness.' Let's have two of the crew in. That would be much the best."

"Oh, it's not worth a lot of fuss," said the Countess. "Let's get it over and done with. I'm beginning to feel sleepy."

"It might be a coma," warned her medical adviser. "Yes, indeed, let's get busy. Come, Peter, what about you? As a son—as a member of the family—"

"That would be nice, Peter," said the Countess with a smile. "Of course, mother."

"Dear boy! And I've an idea—ring for Paul."

Dr. John and Captain Pam approved heartily. Indeed, Dr. John had skipped across and pushed the bell before Simon could move. Captain Pam brought a blotting-pad from a side table. Everybody was being most helpful.

Paul appeared and the position was explained to him. He was as competent and willing as ever. The Countess, sustained by a third large brandy, wrote her signature. It looked like a schoolgirl's though it disposed of wealth untold. Paul signed in the first space. Simon in the second. Captain Pam and Dr. John watched with concern. It was, however, much more natural to sign Peter Mountford aboard the *Stormalong* than Simon Smith. The Pheasant was far away, and Simon Smith was dead.

Paul made his glossy bow and withdrew.

"So helpful," said the Countess. "Really a dear boy."

"That's all fixed," Dr. John rejoiced. "I think we should have just one drink to celebrate a good job done." He himself poured the Countess's. He was evidently quite satisfied in his own mind that brandy could do her nothing but good. The Countess looked at the glass with warm approval. He might be a martinet on occasion, but he had better moments.

"To your early recovery, Hilda!"

"Yes, indeed, dear lady!"

"Good-health, mother!"

"Down the hatch!" said the Countess. And down the hatch it went. "If you'll excuse me I think I'll doze off now." Perhaps she saw her friends' faces fall, and her kindly heart was touched, for she went on, "But, of course, you'll want to know how I've made out the will in case I've bungled it."

The re-action to this was immediate and emphatic. It was a splendid idea; it was the height of wisdom and good sense. So keen were Dr. John and Captain Pam to help that they created a kind of electric tension in the hot, still air.

"I've kept it simple, as your dear father advised, Peter," said the Countess, unfolding the paper. "All these legal terms and so on are just trimmings put in to earn fees. There won't be any law cases to clear up what I mean. I've simply said, 'I, Hilda de Savroni, being in my sane mind and having all my wits about me, do declare that this is my last will and testament.' " She paused for a word of approval and it was hastily given. No one wanted to hold up the proceedings. "I hereby leave all my worldly possessions of every kind to the Home for Lost Dogs, Battersea, London, S.W.' " She was so pleased with herself that she recovered her deep, male laugh. "There!" she rejoiced, "all the lawyers and things in the world couldn't have done better than that." She replaced the document in its envelope, waved it triumphantly and tucked it under her pillow.

A hush had settled on the cabin, a deep and empty hush. For a breath it was as if the Countess were all alone.

"Well, Simon," she asked, "what do you think of that? Aren't you proud of your poor old mum?"

"I am, mum, I am," cried Simon from the depths of his honest and simple heart. "You couldn't have done better. You're a marvel!"

It was a striking tribute, coming from him almost unprecedented. He went further. He flung his arms about her and hugged her; he kissed her, and if her lips were a little dry they hadn't their usual lavish coating of scarlet. The Countess was so delighted that she burst into tears.

"A very fine gesture!" Captain Pam was saying heartily, having got some breath back.

"A most worthy cause," said Dr. John, but his voice was squeaky, making him more of a bat than ever. "And now, Hilda," he added, cheerily, making a fine recovery, "we must see that the Lost Dogs have to wait a long time for their caviare. You must rest at once. Though you don't realize it, you're on the mend. I shall have you on your feet in less than no time."

"Oh, Dr. John," breathed the Countess, as she had had cause to remark so often before, "wherever should we be without you?"

"I hate to think," said Dr. John.

"I'm so, so grateful," said the Countess.

"I don't doubt it," said Dr. John, and even he couldn't quite manage to keep an edge of bitterness off the words.

But the Countess didn't notice. Delighted by her son's warm demonstration of approval, full of excellent brandy, she was quite ready for the sleep which she had earned by her labours.

"Bless you, dear souls," she said drowsily. "Bless—"

She heeled over on her side, and immediately began to breathe slowly and peacefully, having solved the problem of the root of all evil.

They went quietly from the cabin, heads bowed, like mourners, even though the Countess was so very much alive.

In the alleyway, having assured themselves that they were not overheard, Captain Pam and Dr. John faced each other, the one so large and smooth and soft, the other so sharp and pointed and dry. In their anger and mortification they quite forgot Simon.

"Mad!" said Dr. John bitterly. "Stark, staring mad! The Lost Dogs' Home! I'd be prepared to certify her to-morrow."

"A fat lot of good that would do!" Captain Pam commented scornfully, glaring down with pale, popping eyes. "You thought you'd steal a march on me, did you? This would give me the hell of a laugh if I didn't feel so mad I could strangle you. You'd better change your tricks. It's up to you to keep her alive now, see? If you don't I'll have your guts. So you thought it would be a good idea to bump her off, eh? Well, my smart

doctor, you'd better study up all the antidotes in your books and cut out the strychnine."

"Yes, yes," agreed Dr. John absently. "Of course! What sort of a fool do you take me for? Do you have to teach me my A B C? I would work miracles, if one chanced to believe in them. The will—it must be destroyed."

"That at least would leave us no worse off than we were before you tried to get smart, you little tick," said Captain Pam. "If she dies I promise you you'll go after her."

Dr. John was so deep in thought that he was prepared to accept anything.

"Yes, yes," he said as before. "As usual, everything depends on me. It would serve you right if I let her peg out. As a matter of fact she might at any moment—quite naturally—without any help. And there's that damned will, witnessed and all."

"The witnesses could be taken care of," Captain Pam pointed out.

"Oh, naturally, I'd thought of that," said Dr. John impatiently. "Naturally. That fellow Paul you planted is up to tricks. Yes, you've bungled there again, I can tell you. But even so—even if we could get hold of that infernal and lousy will—we're right back where we started from. And now that the old bitch has got this mad idea in her head it will take a lot of shifting. I wonder if we could arrange for her to be bitten by a dog in Alex.?"

Captain Pam pressed his brow.

"You might have something there," he admitted. "It should certainly change her feelings. But a gyp dog-bite might be fatal—from what I've seen of gyp dogs."

"A death-bed recantation?" mused Dr. John. "A new will with a proper appreciation at last of what medical science can do to alleviate pain and so forth."

Captain Pam didn't fancy that.

"It's too tricky and dangerous," he said. "You'd probably botch it, and she might come over all Christian and forgive the dog. Look at the way she sometimes talks of Bingo! And if ever there was a menace he was it."

"If only she were a great deal madder," sighed Dr. John, "or a great deal less. Then it would be easier."

They both fell silent, considering their next moves in the privacy of their minds. They could say what they liked, but Simon lounging there, smiling a little at the two perplexed rogues, thought that his mother was a good deal brighter than they gave her credit, and he was proud of her for having done a good job of work in a very characteristic way.

"Good old mum," thought Simple Simon.

Hansi came down the passage wearing another of her fresh and pretty Austrian frocks, crowned with her hair, radiant and pure, a golden child. Like a burst of sunshine she drove the clouds of gloom and frustration away. Frowns were replaced by smiles.

"Hullo, Hansi, my dear," said Captain Pam. "The very girl I wanted to see." He took her elbow in his big hand and pressed it affectionately. "I was just going to have a badly needed drink. Will you join me?"

"Why, yes, Herr Captain," said Hansi gladly, making her little bob. "I am so dry on this so hot day."

"Me, too," said Dr. John. "I'll join you, Captain Pam, as my own cabin's occupied."

"That will be so nice," said Hansi, though gloom had descended on the Captain again.

Hansi paid no heed at all to Simon. He didn't mind. She had her own business to attend to. Her eyes had never looked more blue and wide. Anybody would have urged her to stay in the *Stormalong* as the owner's companion, particularly if, apart from anything else, she seemed the kind of innocent maid who might turn out to be the queen of hearts.

IV

Life aboard the *Stormalong* was full of change and variety. It never got bogged down in a rut as it did in village and Stalag-lust. That was one of the many reasons why Simon found yachting so enjoyable.

At noon next day the graceful white craft was dancing on again over a sea of poster blue. The little sparkling waves fluttered flags of creamy foam, and a breeze freshened the air.

All the world was gay and lively. Gulls from an island dim on the horizon wheeled and cried.

Mr. Meggsy and his helpers had cured whatever ailed the motors. They did not discuss their mysteries with the uninitiated. Or, at least, Simon hadn't the faintest idea what had been wrong or how it had been put right. That suited him. He knew nothing about marine motors anyway. Sufficient that they pulsed again, and the yacht had come alive. He would never learn whether Dr. John had been up to mischief down in the engine room. But that was the way of it in the *Stormalong*. Nothing was ever solved or cleared up. She simply sailed ahead, and left yesterday's troubles and puzzles behind. As a result they ceased to matter. This struck Simple Simon as a most admirable system. It disposed of everything, from murder down. The past was left astern like a port from which they had sailed. It ceased to exist. If life ashore could be run on the same lines, it seemed to him, people would be much happier.

The Countess was another striking example of this excellent attitude.

Mother and son sat together in the stern, enjoying each other's company and champagne cocktails which had been served by Paul, who recognised this as an occasion. It was also the very day for champagne cocktails. The weather was made for them.

The Countess was as fit as a fiddle. She wore sea-blue slacks and a striped sweater which would have set the boys whistling in a rude way at the Blickington Regal for it revealed much. A sailor's straw hat with ribbons fluttering at the back perched jauntily on her curls. Her make-up had been restored in all its splendour. She was in high spirits, and full of chatter.

Simon realized he would never know now whether the trouble had been lobster and whisky, or strychnine. He accepted that, also, and didn't bother his head as he would have had to in any other world. Oh, he decided again, though it might seem crazy the way life wagged along when you were yachting was very much the best.

"The Depressed People seem even less depressed than usual," said the Countess, beaming on them in her short-sighted way, and quite forgetful of the dislike she felt for them at times.

"A day like this, they couldn't help it," said Simon. He

wouldn't have told his mother for anything that as they were actresses it was natural for them to be gay and bright, and sing and dance to the gramophone. That might have marred her satisfaction.

"If your father hadn't hated the sea like poison, how he would have enjoyed being here at this moment," mused the Countess, briefly studying the golden bubbles rising from the cube of sugar in her glass. "I wonder if dislikes of that kind are carried on to the other side? When we have our séance we must try to find out. I am very conscious of his presence at times, so perhaps he's changed, at least in that way. And then take dogs. How he loathed and abominated dogs! It was quite an obsession with him. I remember when I was a young girl I didn't dislike the beasts very much even if I didn't care for them. It's strange how love and marriage can mould a character. I had such a respect for your poor father's opinion that I came to detest all dogs, big and small."

"What made you like them again, mother?"

"Like them—hell!" said the Countess. "Horrid, useless creatures—fouling the streets, snapping, barking at night and keeping people awake. In a civilized community they'd be forbidden. If I had my way the whole race of mongrels and curs would be destroyed. I'd have them all poisoned."

"Oh, well, mother," said Simon soothingly, "there are no dogs at sea."

He didn't express surprise at these opinions coming from one who planned to make the Lost Dogs' Home a gift of millions. As a dutiful son he would have been the last to question his mother's words or deeds.

"There are sea-dogs," said the Countess with a wave towards Captain Pamphillion who was joking breezily with a Displaced Person. To the Countess she was only a blob of scarlet, but to Simon she was Zaza. The Captain's manner though fatherly had a certain note of fond intimacy which made Simon glad that his mother didn't wear glasses and caused him to look about anxiously for Spike. Spike, however, wasn't on deck and so was spared a sight which might have grieved him.

Dr. John, with a word to this one and that, came down the starboard side.

"We are celebrating, eh, Hilda?" he said, rubbing his little claws in honest satisfaction. "Well, I really think we're justified. May I join you? I feel a very happy and satisfied man to-day when I look at you restored to the full bloom of health."

Paul, with that genius of his for being on the spot, had appeared, and more drinks were ordered.

"I do believe the dear boy's psychic," said the Countess. "But as we were saying, Dr. John, you certainly have every cause to be proud. I feel one hundred per cent. Really, if I could spare you I'd say you should be the King's physician."

"You're so generous, dear Hilda," said Dr. John, paused just a beat, and added, "with praise. Still, I am happy in the task I've made my life's work, and I'm afraid the King must remain out of luck. My place is here with you."

"Oh, indeed it is," said the Countess.

"Hilda," said Dr. John, drawing up a chair, "I've had a stroke of inspiration. I venture to claim it goes to show how your interests are always uppermost in my mind."

"Dear Dr. John," said the Countess affectionately, "I don't need anything to show me that, but what have you thought up now?"

Simon had to smile at his mother. She sometimes had a quaint way of expressing things.

"This," said Dr. John. "Your recent turn has convinced me that you need a female companion, and that you are missing your massage."

The Countess raised her hands in horror.

"Please, please, dear Dr. John," she said, all at once the patient timid before her medical adviser, "don't do that to me!"

"Do what, Hilda?"

"Get that nurse of yours," said the Countess. "I'm sure she's a marvel and all you say, but she would be so horribly strict and always right and so like a matron. I'm sure she'd wear a red cape and make me feel an old crock. Oh, I grant I may be, but all the same I'd hate to have her bossing and bullying me. Please, Dr. John—!"

Dr. John hushed her with a sign which was almost like a blessing, and his manner became bedside and humouring.

"My dear Hilda," he said, "don't distress yourself needlessly. In everything your slightest wish is law. Had Sister Robertson ten bars to her Royal Red Cross—which she's probably earned—I still wouldn't urge her on you against your will. I should say Heaven forbid!—if one chanced to believe in Heaven."

"You bad man, but you're very sweet," said the Countess. "Then what is the big idea?"

"I have made a most happy discovery. You cast your bread upon the waters when you gave passages to these luckless Displaced Persons, and it is returned to you a thousandfold."

"Why, that's the Bible, isn't it?" said the Countess. "I didn't think you chanced to believe in that, Dr. John?"

She laughed in her chest, and made a little fencer's thrust at him with her long holder.

"A hit—a palpable hit!" grinned Dr. John, entering into the fun.

Paul brought the drinks.

"Thank you so much, my sweet!" said the Countess.

Dr. John's grin died, and his parchment face crinkled in a frown.

"You will spoil that fellow, Hilda," he said, when they were alone again.

"One couldn't!" the Countess protested. "He's just the most natural and charming boy. I hope you're not getting jealous of him, too, Peter?"

"I certainly am not, mother," said Simon, and, as ever he spoke the truth, for he didn't envy Paul in the slightest aboard the *Stormalong*.

Dr. John sipped his drink and was silent a moment, thinking about Paul.

"To resume, Hilda. I've made a most fortunate discovery. One of our Displaced Persons is a qualified nurse and a first-class masseuse. She's a delightful personality, and might have been made to be your companion."

"She hasn't got the plague or anything?" asked the Countess rather dubiously.

Dr. John had to laugh.

"Heavens, no, Hilda. She's as healthy as this sunshine. She's young and innocent and fresh. You'll find her the best of company. Her name is Hansi."

"Hansi?" said the Countess. "Is that the darling girl from the Vienna Woods? Oh, yes, I know her. I had a long talk to her the other afternoon when you were busy down below. Queer that she didn't mention to me that she was a nurse."

"She's a shy child," said Dr. John. "She would have felt, perhaps, that she was putting herself forward. She only happened to mention it to me in my professional capacity when she heard you were—you were off-colour."

Captain Pamphillion stepped over the rope and stood before them, his cap tilted back, his big face shining with pleasure.

"Splicing the mainbrace, eh?" he remarked in sailor fashion. "And the very best of grounds! Congratulations, dear lady, on your remarkable recovery. You've tricked the good doctor here again, eh? He's not going to make an invalid out of the owner, what? Forgive a shipmaster's little joke, Dr. John. I congratulate you most warmly on a magnificent job of work. Never saw you looking better, Hilda. We must all have a drink. In fact, I asked the steward to bring another round. This is the kind of weather we signed on for. I arranged it specially in your honour, Hilda."

"Dear Captain Pam," said the Countess, "it's so nice to see you so happy about my recovery."

"Happy?" said Captain Pamphillion. "I'm like a sand-boy. And I've a nice surprise for you—a kind of present to mark the occasion."

"Whatever can it be, you dear man?"

"A new companion," said Captain Pam, with an air. "And I don't mean anyone we've got to get out from England either."

"How very thoughtful," said the Countess, "but I'm afraid Dr. John has got in first. In a thing like that I must take his advice. The post's already as good as filled."

Captain Pam's high mood subsided.

"I don't think it could be anyone who'd be a patch on Hansi," he said.

The Countess clapped her hands.

"But it is Hansi!" she cried. "Now isn't that perfect? Remember how you two men were quarrelling back at Monte over this very question? And now here you are in perfect agreement. I'm so glad you ordered that other round. This certainly calls for a drink."

Despite her happiness and the fortunate chance, a meditative silence had fallen on Dr. John and Captain Pam.

V

With that eloquent soft laugh of hers, Hansi climbed up on the stool in the corner, modestly smoothing the flowery cotton frock over her knees, and Simon, having consulted the log to remind himself what the course should be, brought the *Stormalong* back to her proper path.

"I am sorry that I don't come to you now as I am nicest, Peter," said Hansi, "but I must be the most discreet since I am the companion to a Countess. Those two good friends, who did recommend me so warmly, would not like to find me here with you even in my clothes. They would have even greater anger otherwise. They are not good men if they don't like you. I think they would kill one just as easily as those Nazis."

"I think they would," said Simon.

"Are you a 'yokel,' mine Peter?"

"I suppose I am, Hansi. Why?"

"Then, my goodness!—there is trouble. Those two, they don't like each other, and watch like the cat and the mouse, but sometimes they are going to work together. They know I am only a little girl and far too pretty to have any of the sense, so sometimes they say things before me when I am listening. This is one: The Captain he says, 'It is time the Yokel was got out of the way. He digs too deep in.' And the Doctor he rubs his hands and answers, 'For once you talk sense. Before Alexandria, eh?' To this the Captain makes reply, 'Why yes—the sooner the better. The question is, how?' 'We must think,' says then the Doctor, and after that they are remembering that I am there, and each starts to tell as before how he got me my place and that kind of thing to try to have Hansi for himself, when all the time she is to her Peter. But if you are The Yokel, Peter, then that is bad, eh?"

"It's none too good," Simon admitted. "I'd certainly better watch my step. Come to think of it, it's a wonder I wasn't pushed over the side long ago."

"Do they do such things here in this boat?" Hansi, still a newcomer, sounded quite shocked.

"Oh, yes," said Simon. "Often." He spoke in a matter-of-course way; he was an old hand.

"I don't think I like that much," said Hansi. "Perhaps soon if I don't do such things as they want then I am murdered, too?"

"It's quite possible, Hansi," said Simon frankly.

"Then it might be this is not such a very fine place I have got myself?"

"It has its dangers," said Simon. "Particularly if you get on too well with the Countess."

"And Paul?—what of him?"

"He's as good as had it," said Simon. "Any morning now he won't be aboard."

"No!" gasped Hansi.

"Oh, yes, Hansi. I should think his number's up."

"You don't tell him this, mine Peter?"

"I never butt in," said Simon. "And besides he wouldn't believe me. He'd just think I was crazy."

"That I think a bit, too," said Hansi, "and yet you seem to have fine wisdom of your own. But surely the Countess would be upset if they were killing her son? Surely that they would not dare to do?"

"They'd fix it somehow," said Simon. "It would happen, and then it would just be left behind."

"Tell me, mine Peter, if all this be true, why do not you do something? Why do you not strike at them first and knock them into that sea?"

In the light of the binnacle Simon shook his head a trifle regretfully.

"I'd be no good at murder. I'm a quiet, easy-going sort."

"You are too gentle, too good, too sweet. Oh, good gracious, I should like to get rid of them for you!"

"I wouldn't try it, Hansi. It's you who'd go. Thanks all the same. You're a good girl."

"You have love to me?" asked Hansi, soft and warm.

"You know I have."

"Give to me a kiss and a cigarette, mine Peter."

Simon obeyed, and then lit up himself. The *Stormalong* had

strayed when he returned to his post. Hansi smoked, lost in thought. Obviously the yacht's atmosphere was working on her. The facts of life, and death, were different here from those which had prevailed by the Worthersee. She was very much a woman, and she hadn't Simon's simplicity to save her from the *Stormalong*. Doubtless it seemed to her she was as clever as the rest of them, and that she, too, could plot and pull wires. The temptation was very great. Everyone succumbed to it except Simple Simon.

"This boat would be fine if they could be got out of the way," she decided at last. "And perhaps that Paul. It would be nice if they got that Paul out of the way first. That would be saving trouble. Oh, good gracious, it would be so fine and grand with only you and me and that nice, silly old Countess." Her voice grew dreamy as she began to weave her girlish fantasies. "I am also a very good cook, mine Peter. I cook the Austrian good things—the Wiener Schnitzel, the Apfelstrudel—these and much more I do cook better than anyone. Oh, yes, I knit and sew and weave like anything. I can keep a house very fine. I can scrub the floors and polish with the wax until you nearly break your neck. All is well in my house some day. I am not just the actress and fast and gay like those others, though to you it may seem a little so, but that is different for I am to you and you are to me. I can sing the Austrian songs that are gay, and do our dances. I can plough the field and dig. I am very strong and healthy. I could give you many men sons, mine Peter. Do not you think it will be good when we are to marry?"

Simon threw the end of his cigarette over the side, and answered Hansi with a kiss. Their time together was precious. A lot of talk about Daphne and so on would have spoilt it all.

"You're a girl and a half, Hansi," he said fondly.

"I can also play on the accordeon," said Hansi. "Very soon your mother will tell you to marry me."

Simon laughed indulgently, and held her close. Poor little Hansi! She was like Mary Jane and all the rest. She thought she could shape a future and security out of the chance that had put her into the yacht of a multi-millionairess. She wasn't content, like Simon, to take the good things of the day, and night, and rest content, leaving to-morrow to look after itself. Again it wasn't his business to warn her. He was no good at that sort

of job, and she would only go ahead. Once you started to scheme and be smart aboard the *Stormalong* you were up the pole. Poor little Hansi! It all seemed plain-sailing to her, and yet she didn't know the first thing about the complexities and difficulties and snares of this world. For instance, she hadn't even any idea that he was Simon Smith and that Daphne would never dream of divorcing the son of the landlord of The Pheasant.

And that was only one point. It made his head ache to think of all poor little Hansi had before her.

A pity he wasn't a different kind of chap, able to explain and argue and reason, but he wasn't and that was that.

With a sudden wriggle, like an electric eel, Hansi had escaped from his arms, and, alone in the wheelhouse, he remembered his duties. He struck four bells with efficient sharpness, even though he was fifteen minutes late, and spun the smooth-spoked wheel vigorously. It was good to be concerned again with such simple and straightforward matters. For once he didn't regret Hansi's going.

Captain Pamphillion filled the other doorway, very much the shipmaster. With the sounds of the bell still trembling in the air he glanced at the clock, and then he noted the busy compass-card which was an even greater tell-tale.

"Hell's bells, Peter," he growled, "have you been dreaming?"

"I'm afraid I have," said Simon truthfully, for the last hour or so had quite the quality of a dream.

Captain Pamphillion boiled.

"You may be the owner's son ten times over—or you mayn't be anything of the kind—but I won't put up with this." He clenched his fist. "I've a good mind to teach you a lesson in seamanship you won't forget."

Without betraying that he did so Simon braced himself. This might be it. An indignant punch on the jaw, sprung as a surprise, could easily knock a man off his feet, out of the wheelhouse and into the deep, dark sea. He recalled the little push which Spike had given the Count. That, for all he knew, had been fatal. And in the same instant it occurred to him that the game could be played in reverse. Hansi's idea had been to get in first. He kept his hands on the spokes. It was no use: the thought of murder, even with the best of grounds, did not

appeal to him. It was comfortable to know that, forewarned, he was more than a match physically for this large soft man.

That point had apparently occurred to Captain Pamphillion also. He was not only forewarned—he was forearmed. His fist thrust into the pocket of his jacket and when it re-appeared it held a businesslike revolver. The weapon glinted in the star-light.

Simon didn't like the look of this at all. He remained calm, however. Guns had been pointed at him before and he was still alive. This was only one man and one gun. He watched for an opportunity.

"Smith," said Captain Pamphillion, and there was nothing of the bluff and jolly sailor about him now, "you haven't played in with me. You were warned. Instead you've gone your own way and wormed your way into that crazy hag's affection. I wouldn't mind betting there's another will in your favour that we've heard nothing about. Oh, yes, I thought of that. Anyway, you're in the way, and you must go. I can't say I'm sorry. You should have learnt before this. You've had enough lessons." His left hand went up and gripped the whistle-lanyard the other held the pistol very steady at a yard's range. "A blast on the siren will drown the shot. You'll be over the side in a split second. This gun will follow you. By the time anybody gets here I shall be standing amazed in the wheelhouse which I found empty when I came up to see that all was shipshape. My first re-action was to sound the alarm. Why should you have committed suicide? And yet, why not? Who knows the answers to such questions? Simple, isn't it, Simple Simon Smith?"

"As simple as falling off a log," Simon had to admit. He daren't move his hands from the wheel. His feet were bare, but a well-aimed kick seemed to offer the only chance.

The lanyard began to tighten against the stars.

"Ah, there you are, dear boy," said the Countess, blundering blindly in from the other side. "I told you I'd come and sit with you, and here I am."

"How very nice of you, mum," said Simon affectionately. "I am so glad to see you."

"Feeling so fit after my nice rest in bed," said the Countess, "I just felt I couldn't stay below. Why, is that you, Captain

Pam—my eyes aren't accustomed to the dark yet. I've been reading."

"Dear lady," boomed Captain Pam, "I do congratulate you on your recovery. To be out and about in the middle watch—splendid! splendid!"

The gun had disappeared instantly, and he was his hearty, jovial self again.

"And why aren't you in your bunk, Captain?"

"A master is never off duty, Hilda. I just came up to see if I could catch this young man napping."

"And he didn't, mother," said Simon with modest satisfaction.

"Of course he didn't!" cried the Countess. "Fie on you, Captain Pam, to even think you would!"

Captain Pam laughed heartily.

"You mothers are all alike," he said, "but every sailor is somebody's son, and believe me, they take a bit of handling, though I must admit that Peter here is better than most of 'em. Let me bring you a chair, Hilda."

"Please do, Captain Pam," said the Countess. "How very kind and thoughtful you are. Isn't he a darling, Peter?"

"Yes, mother," said Simon, who never corrected her.

"Wasn't that a lovely surprise, my lamb?"

"Perfect," said Simon. "You couldn't have given me a better. You're a real lifesaver."

"You flatterer!" said the Countess, mightily pleased. "I suppose you mean you were bored to death?"

"Very nearly," said Simon.

"Dear Peter—! I'm so glad—I mean that I was able to come to the rescue. But I mustn't pretend I hadn't a purpose. The truth is, darling, I was so excited that I couldn't go off. I was just lying there with my poor old brain in a whirl, and it suddenly struck me that the right thing to do was to share my happiness with you since you're the one most directly concerned. It's about dear Paul. Such a lovely boy. Of course, I don't know how you'll feel—and I'm not trying to influence you—but it seems to me you'll find him not so much a step-father as a brother."

"You don't mean to say that Paul has—?" He broke off, and said. "Not a word, mother!"

The Captain, rather out of breath, had returned with the chair. He must have run both ways.

"What—secrets?" he laughed.

"Nothing of the sort, Captain Pam," said the Countess, sinking gratefully into the chair. "Thank you so much, dear man. No, I was just telling Peter that Paul proposed to me to-night. There, isn't that nice!—Peter and Paul! Like brothers."

Captain Pamphillion was quite out of breath now.

"Hilda!" he gasped. "Hilda!" He clutched his brow.

"I suppose it is a bit of a surprise, Captain Pam," said the Countess, "but I did think you'd be thrilled. He's a little younger than me, of course, but that's a fault on the right side. I don't feel anything like forty myself."

"Forty?" said Captain Pam, a breach of manners of which he would never have been guilty if he hadn't had so much to think of.

"I really don't! And I like to have young people round me. Wilson was really much too old. It will be so nice for Peter, too. And he'll be so useful. I must admit I appreciate care and attention, and I've never met anyone better in that way than dear Paul. He'll wait on me hand and foot."

"I—I trust, Hilda, you haven't done anything too hasty about this?"

The Countess's hand fluttered like a moth, and she chuckled.

"I couldn't very well ask him to put it in writing. He swept me off my feet—he wouldn't wait for an answer. His Southern blood must have been pounding in his veins. It was a moment I shall never forget. It reminded me of a night, oh, years ago in Madrid. I . . ."

Captain Pamphillion, who lacked Simon's delicacy, didn't want to hear about Madrid.

"The hell with that, Hilda," he said brutally, his sailor's blood pounding in turn, "I think you might have consulted your oldest friend before you got entangled in such a ghastly mess."

"Ghastly mess, Captain Pam?" said the Countess, on her dignity and hurt. "Is that meant to be funny?"

"No," said Captain Pam. "You mean you've told this snake-in-the-grass that you'll marry him?"

"Naturally! I jumped at the chance."

Captain Pamphillion was not just the old gasbag his friend Dr. John declared him to be. He was a big enough man in that moment to conquer his feelings, stand silent, and review this new situation. Though his face was hidden in the gloom he contrived, as he did so, to suggest a friend who, though taken aback for the moment, was now beginning to grasp the news.

"Hopping Neptune, you took the wind out of my sails!" he exclaimed then on quite a different note. "You're a marvel, Hilda. No wonder a poor old sailor can't keep up with you at times." He stepped into the wheelhouse, found her hand, and raised it to his lips, stooping low in clumsy gallantry. "Allow me to be the first to congratulate you. Your happiness comes before everything else. I think it's a grand match, and you're a lucky pair. He'll make the ideal husband for a woman of your temperament who has the secret of eternal youth. You couldn't have made a better choice. I look forward to dancing at your wedding in Alexandria. Nothing will please me better."

This enthusiasm on the part of her old friend brought tears. For the moment the Countess could only wipe her eyes and sniff. Captain Pamphillion patted her shoulder, fatherly and benign.

"Oh, Captain Pam, you've made me so happy," said the Countess. "At first I thought you were going to disapprove, and then I should have been utterly miserable."

"Disapprove? Disapprove? But, Hilda, why should I? How could I? It was simply that a plain fellow like me when he hears such good news so suddenly is a bit staggered. I'm no courtier, y'know, dear lady. I'm just old Captain Pam."

The Countess took his hand from her shoulder and pressed it to her cheek.

"Old Captain Faithful," she said, and wiped her eyes again.

"And now I must get down below, and leave you two together. I must tell Dr. John the splendid news. We all seem restless to-night. I suppose it's romance in the air, eh? He was playing patience when I came up. No doubt he still is. I should imagine he'll want to offer his warmest felicitations."

"If he does—but mind only if he does, for I wouldn't have him disturbed for anything—he might bring up a medicinal brandy or so," said the Countess. "This is quite an occasion and we should have a drink. Even the man at the wheel."

Captain Pam beamed on Simon.

"Most unseamanlike," he said, "but it's not every night a quartermaster hears of his mother's engagement when he's got the middle watch. I think we must make an exception. And I don't doubt your doctor will feel the same in your case, Hilda."

"Only if it's no trouble," said the Countess. "I can't help feeling it would be hardly a nice thing to ring for Paul in the circumstances."

"How thoughtful you are, dear lady!" said Captain Pam, and having given mother and son a final benediction he left them.

"Such a kindly old-world gentleman under his Jack-Tar ways," the Countess sighed. "He was a trifle put out at first. But that's only natural. He's been in love with me for ages. Well, poor old blighter, he's missed the boat properly now. You're quite happy about it all, Peter?"

"Quite happy if you are, mother," said Simon, and it didn't even cross his mind to disillusion her about Captain Pam. That would have been cruel.

"Isn't it going to be fun, Peter? With Hansi to complete the quartette we shall all be young and happy and cheerful again. I feel like a two-year-old—a real young filly. I hope Dr. John looks sharp with the brandy."

She rattled on, painting a gay and colourful future; she bubbled and giggled like a schoolgirl. Simon made the necessary comments but it wouldn't have mattered had he remained silent. That was as well for he was in an absent and thoughtful mood. All these people making plans for To-morrow when To-day was the only time they had.

It had been a great RAF saying: There's no future in it.

The skipper had used it just before they baled out from the blazing Wellington.

VI

"Alas, a *femme fatale!*!" sighed Dr. John, as he had sighed before. "That's French for a fatal woman, Peter."

"One would really think that the dear lady was under some

kind of curse," said Captain Pamphillion. "I was never more upset in my life. What a tragedy! I imagine his good fortune was too much for him. This means that I shall have to take a wheel, for Briggs will have to assist Spike until we get rid of our mercy cargo. We certainly have no luck with stewards, blast the lot of them."

"Course he must 'a'been after Hansi," said Spike out of the corner of his mouth as he hurried by.

Hansi's eyes looked wider and lovelier, twin lakes, but the shadows of clouds passed over them.

"Oh, great gracious, mine Peter," she said, pausing as if they were discussing the weather, "so it is not you that is mad, and people even in these times can be killed just like that. I don't think perhaps this is such a fine, grand place I have got myself, unless we kill them quick."

Everyone had their word with Simon, and Simon was civil to each, of course. The death of Paul had not upset him. He had known it had to happen, and what with their Displaced Persons, including Hansi, and the brief time the steward had been aboard, Paul had never been as real to him as he had been, apparently, to the Countess. He was already as vague as Count Bingo had always been—he belonged to Yesterday.

If in this he was callous, at least he did not look at the Mediterranean and wonder morbidly when his turn would come. This was To-day and the sun shone and life was good. At the moment he was alive. It would have been folly to look ahead.

The Countess kept her room, in mourning for the husband who might have been.

VII

Spike and Simon were enjoying a smoke in the sanity and serenity of the fo'c'sle.

"Y' know, Simon," said Spike, "if I was the marrying sort I wouldn't mind getting spliced up to Zaza."

"From all I've seen of her," said Simon, remembering the night she had helped to retrieve the lifebuoys, "she's a beautiful kid."

"I'll say! And good as gold under all her fun. I don't say

I'm the only bloke she's ever fallen for, but I don't believe it's ever been so serious in the past. She's goofy about me. She doesn't know there's another man on board—not even you. If a fellow was to settle down, marry Zaza, and, say, take a little pub he'd be on a pretty good wicket."

Many men who'd been reared in the Trade would have pointed out to Spike that taking a little pub was not as simple as all that, and things like capital and experience were needed, but it was never Simon's way to shatter dreams. This was only another of many dreams which would not be realized. Let Spike enjoy it in To-day.

"Yes," said Spike, "you can't go on drifting about the seas all your life, and though I'm a Cockney, and proud of it, I think now I've seen all the world I want to, I'd like to be somewhere in the country. A quiet place not so far out that you couldn't get to town when you felt like a bit of a bust. It wouldn't really matter much how quiet it was—not with Zaza. She'd keep things humming. You wouldn't turn into a country bumpkin with her around the joint. A little old inn! Roses round the door, and a few hens and a dog. Not too big, on account of the work, and yet big enough to give you a comfortable living. Pulling up the beer from the nice cool cellar"—he went through the gestures in a rapt way—"and always a nice pint for yourself when you felt like it. Not half bad. And when you'd got rid of the customers at night and counted up the dough, there'd be Zaza to go to bed with. That'd do me. I'd stay in m'own pub, and never even want to go back to Marseilles and The Ram of Derbyshire." He chuckled. "That was a night, eh, Simon? Blimey!"

"It was a night all right," said Simon.

"Mind, I won't say I haven't had better since. I hadn't met Zaza then. I tell you nights I did enjoy—them swimming nights. I wish Mr. Meggsy hadn't been in such a hurry getting the motors started. I could have done with a lot more like that. It's not so easy getting a comfortable few moments with Zaza now. You're like a cat on hot bricks all the time. But swimming about out there in that water as warm as milk—ar! You missed a heap of fun not coming in, Simon."

"I suppose I did, Spike, but I'm no swimmer. Never had a chance to learn."

"You had the chance then, Simon. And lots of long-haired teachers. They're the best to learn anything from, 'specially swimming." His monkey face became grave, and he studied Simon with solemn eyes. "Wisht now I'd made you."

"Why, Spike?"

"Even if you didn't become no Cross-Channel expert you'd have picked up a bit. Those lifebuoys for instance. You'd have learned how to get into them. There's quite a trick in that. You don't try to dive into them, or like as not you'll find yourself drowning with your feet in the air, and you can't breathe through your blinkin' feet. No, the dodge is to duck under 'em, come up through the middle, and get 'em under your armpits. Then you're set like a jelly. That's the kind of stuff it's never no harm to know."

"I suppose not," said Simon.

"Particularly in your case," Spike went on, still very seriously.

"How do you mean, Spike?"

"Well, Simon, as I figure it you're next on the list. As sure as God made little apples you'll be in the drink before long. The marvel to me is they did in Paul before you. I don't think he really mattered. But then I suppose he was easier. Yes, that would explain that. But you're a starter any time now, Simon, take it from me."

"If I am," Simon pointed out, "there wouldn't be anybody to throw me a lifebuoy."

"Ar, you never know," said Spike, "There just ain't no telling about things like that. It's all in the run of the luck. I might just chance to be passing by, or Hansi or someone like that. And a lifebuoy would come in dead handy if you knew how to use it, with the yacht going away from you at a speed of knots. Course, as you say, there mightn't be no one about. I don't suppose there would be. Never was with the others anyway. So perhaps it wouldn't have been any good bothering. Not that you'd have found it much bother." Memories drove away his gloom. "Those were nights all right, those swimming nights. For two pins I'd do a bit of sabotage and see if we could have some more."

Caleb lounging into the fo'c'sle heard Spike's final words, and sat down on the side of his bunk. His brown face was wreathed in smiles of happy reminiscence, and he stroked the red and blue designs on his bare left arm.

"Mightn't suit Mr. Meggsy, Spike," he said, "but it'd be okay by me. There was a little red head. I give her the nickname of Cayenne. Red Pepper, see? She'd never seen tattooing like mine. Thought I was a proper merman or something. I had to show her the works, floating on me back and on me face. Felt like an exhibit in a sideshow. But I must say Cayenne was very appreciative. She knew works of art when she saw them. This yacht's too dam' small. You need the sea to get a bit of decent privacy. Yes, I'm with you, Spike. They were all right, them swimming nights. Better'n a game of shove-ha'penny any time."

Caleb and Spike sat thinking wistfully of the past, wishing it back again. No use. The swimming nights had been left astern.

The engine room door opened and Mr. Meggsy appeared. He brought an air of anger and distress into that quiet place. His ingot of a body was trembling, and his usually impassive face was flushed and scowling. He was shocked, he was outraged, he wasn't himself at all.

This new Mr. Meggsy, whom they had never seen before, became the centre of attention, but nobody dared to ask what had happened.

Without a word Mr. Meggsy went to the head of the table where he sat down in the chair which was reserved for him, his throne. He dropped into it heavily, like one glad of support. He stared past and through them at the bulkhead behind which his motors purred.

"Jezebel!" he said, more to himself than them. "Jezebel!"

The name, spoken so bitterly, continued to tremble in the clean and quiet air. And still no one else dared to speak. You didn't question Mr. Meggsy.

He clasped his hands on the table, as if in prayer, and addressed them rather than his shipmates.

"She came to me there in my own engine room—in my

engine room!—and in broad daylight—in broad daylight!—offered me her body for money."

He broke off and brooded. The hush deepened. Had it been anybody other than Mr. Meggsy he would have been bombarded with rude and ribald questions. You didn't bombard Mr. Meggsy with questions like that. But suddenly love made Spike impetuous and daring. He couldn't contain himself a moment longer.

"Not—not Zaza?" he asked with such unease and unhappiness that it was apparent he wasn't quite as sure of Zaza and their future as he had sounded just previously.

Mr. Meggsy continued to look down at his hands, but his bald head wagged in denial, setting a lover's heart at rest.

"Fifi," he said.

You didn't guffaw when Mr. Meggsy said that. The name was one you would never have expected to hear from his lips. It sounded quite shocking, indecent.

They waited, spellbound.

"And yet good out of evil," said Mr. Meggsy still to himself. "If she hadn't come plying her trade I might never have been certain. Now the truth is out, now the scandal is known. A mercy ship, indeed! Say rather a white slave ship—a hell ship—a floating sink of iniquity. I felt it all along, but I had no proof. I had proof enough from those scarlet lips in two minutes. She flung it in my face—the whole story. Displaced Persons, the pair of them called them, and even as they lied their pockets were full of poisoned gold. They thought they could pull wool over everybody's eyes, and reap the filthy wages of sin. Displaced Persons! I had it all from Fifi. She flaunted it at me. She mocked my horror. They are nothing more than a cargo of hand-picked harlots being shipped by some master pimp to the brothels of Alexandria."

He rested his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands. Mouths hanging open they stared at him. Even Simon was at a loss. Hansi, in her pretty way, had said she would tell him the truth. She hadn't said a word about harlots and brothels. He wasn't so much shocked as surprised.

Briggs poked his head in, all unknowing.

"Hey, Simon," he called, "what about my relief? You're ten minutes late already."

Simon started to his feet, readily, eagerly, quite delighted to have this reason for escaping from the fo'c'sle which wasn't the place it had been.

He took with him the memory of Spike's face. Spike looked as if he had been hit on the head with a hammer.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

THE wind was warm and sticky, but it blew sufficiently hard to raise a sea which set the *Stormalong* swaying and plunging. Squalls of rain came at intervals, driving across the waters in silver curtains with such sharp edges that sometimes there was bright sunshine on either side. This weather had cleared the deck, which shone wet and black. The stubby masts and funnel rocked this way and that.

Simon, apparently, had found his sea-legs, for the motion did not worry him at all, and it seemed that Hansi, among her other virtues, was a good sailor. They sat in the stern under the awning, and the gulls weaved and cried. It was natural for them to be together now that Hansi was the Countess's companion, but Simon had an idea that this was a state of affairs which neither Dr. John nor Captain Pamphillion had foreseen. He wasn't at all sure that it was healthy for either Hansi or him. However, that was the kind of thing it was useless to worry about. Hansi was knitting a brightly coloured scarf for the Countess. In view of her employer's large and colourful wardrobe the task was probably superfluous but it showed that she took her new place seriously, and certainly she was, as she had claimed, a very good knitter.

Simon had not raised the point of Mr. Meggsy's announcement that morning. He wasn't one to cross-examine a girl as pretty as Hansi. If she claimed to be an actress it was as much her own affair as if she claimed to be the daughter of a count or a humble waitress. All these details were unimportant, particularly aboard the *Stormalong*, and his happy nature did not allow him to dwell on them. He regarded Hansi with pleased attention, because the daylight found no flaws in his companion of the night watches.

Another rain squall hammered across the leaping sea.

"So here we sit, mine Peter," said Hansi, "like that old married couple, but yet we aren't married, though goodness one would think so, and now I am coming to remember you don't say last night that we are going to be married in Alexandria."

"No," Simon agreed, "I didn't say that."

"And why not, mine lover?"

Simon laughed, knowing it folly to plan ahead. "We're not in Alexandria yet," he pointed out.

Shadows came across the lakes of Hansi's eyes.

"What just is that meaning?"

"We may never get there, Hansi. Look what happened to Paul."

"But that is different," said Hansi. "He was just a steward."

"My mother was going to marry him."

"But that is different to you marrying to your Hansi."

"I wonder is it?" Simon said, and indeed he was wondering. "I don't think Captain Pamphillion or Dr. John would take a very good view of it."

The shadows darkened and Hansi considered.

"I am seeing what you mean," she admitted. "And yet it seems to me not so. They are only wanting me and not to marry. They might think it would be fine that I am marrying to The Yokel, and then they don't have to worry at all. Those two would not think that to my husband only I am true. To them it would give the good laugh that I am married to the English milady's son and still they can chase after me. And you?" said Hansi, considering further. "You know that they are more likely to murder you off because you are her son than if to me you are marrying. Yet still I don't hear you saying, 'Please to be marrying to me, mine so darling Hansi.' "

"It mightn't be lucky," said Simon. "I've been aboard this yacht longer than you, and as soon as anyone proposes they vanish."

"No one has proposed to me and vanished," said Hansi. "Except, of course, Paul, and he did not propose to me marrying."

Simon expressed no surprise at this revelation in passing.

With Hansi there beside him, looking as she did, he would have been the last to blame Paul or anybody else.

"I still don't hear you say those words," said Hansi, and her lovely lips pouted.

Simon, who had no intention of saying them but was too kind and gentle to hurt the lovely Austrian, was rescued again by his mother. She always seemed to be saving him from one thing and another, since that far-off night when she had saved him from a miserable death by drowning. He jumped up and went to help her, for, though the rain had passed over the deck was slippery and the Countess didn't seem particularly steady on her feet. She wore black for Paul, but seemed in high spirits.

"Bless you, dear boy," she said, as Simon took her arm. "You're always on the spot when you're needed."

"And so are you, mother," said Simon with truth.

"It was so stuffy below with the ports shut," said the Countess. "And really I don't know what those Depressed People are up to. Such a lot of giggling and rustling and queer noises. I hope none of them are running temperatures because of the plague. And it's not merely that they're being seasick. Dear Hansi, how nice to find you here!"

Hansi rose and held out her pretty frock and made her small country curtsy.

"See what I knit to you, milady."

The Countess peered at the few rows.

"Exactly what I wanted," she said. "So bright and nice. For really I'm not going to wear mourning long for Paul. After all, it was a very brief engagement, and life's much too short. Poor dear Paul! As the saying goes, 'Those whom the gods love die young.' But he was such a happy soul that I'm sure he wouldn't want us to weep and wail, and honestly I don't think we should. It was rather selfish of him to pop the jolly old question to me, and then bump himself off before breakfast."

Hansi was considering the Countess, eyes wider than ever with wonder. Perhaps she didn't understand the slang; perhaps she found something strange in the Countess's attitude. To Simon, of course, all was normal and everyday.

"You're quite right not to fret, mother dear," he said,

giving her hand a squeeze. "After all Paul is left far behind now."

"Yes, indeed, until the sea gives up its dead," said the Countess. "I wonder what all our friends from the *Stormalong* will have to tell us on Judgment Day? But that's rather morbid, isn't it, darling? And you don't want me to be morbid, do you? In fact, I've just resolved not to be. Oh, what a weak, silly old woman I am! Still I must admit I miss Paul. He was so attentive. Much better than Wilson. I do hope the next steward we get is as good and that he doesn't fall in love with me. These constant changes are upsetting. Paul would have been here long before this in his helpful way, particularly seeing Dr. John isn't about. I wonder how Dr. John and Captain Pam are occupying their time? I don't see nearly as much of them as I used to, and in a way I can't truthfully say I'm sorry. Perhaps now that they're sharing a cabin they've taken up some game."

Hansi was about to say something, but, after an instant's reflection didn't. Either she was becoming more and more accustomed to life aboard the *Stormalong* or her new responsibilities had made her careful, like Simon, of the Countess's feelings.

"Come, cheer me up," said the Countess. "What have you two young things been talking about?"

Again Hansi paused very briefly, but this time she decided to speak.

"We have been talking together, mine Peter and I, of marrying to each other."

"Really!" said the Countess. "How very exciting!"

Simon said nothing, because he had nothing to say on this subject.

"Good gracious," said Hansi, "it excites me so much."

"It must, it must," said the Countess. "To think of my dear boy having found the girl who will share his life among a lot of Depressed People. What a turn up for the Books—! Really, you could knock me down with a feather."

"Me, too, mother," said Simon.

"Oh, I do think it's so romantic," said the Countess. "I'm thrilled to the back teeth. But don't you think, you dear children, that you are being just a shade hasty? You haven't

known each other very long. I'm always in favour of a long courtship. It's such a help. Perhaps I'm prejudiced. I must admit none of mine have lasted any time at all, except in the case of your dear father, Peter. Of course, I couldn't deny you anything, you darlings, and I only wish Paul were alive to make up the gay, young quartette as I'd planned all along. But I should hate to think of you being in too much of a hurry."

"How right you are as usual, mum," said Simon with a depth of feeling.

The Countess blew him a kiss.

"My lamb," she said, "I always know I've said or done the right thing when you call your mother Mum as you did when you were a little boy in short pants. Ah, those were happy days. How your dear father doted on you! I remember the very first time he ever set eyes on you. He just looked down and said in his simple manly way, 'Merciful Heavens!' It was a prayer, Peter, and he wasn't one who prayed easily in a hypocritical way, as so many do. And then again . . ."

Simon sat back, soothed and interested in his mother's strange anecdotes of his childhood. He watched the gulls and the sunshine and the silver of the rain. Hansi didn't seem so happy. A slight frown dwelt on her lovely brow. Already, however, she had adapted herself to her job. No one could be long in close contact with the Countess without realizing that she had to be allowed to take her own way, or checked with a cruel rein. Hansi, as Simon had good cause to know, was a kindhearted girl.

" . . . And then your dear father said, I can almost hear him now, 'I should like to send the snivelling little nincompoop round the Horn before the mast. That might knock a bit of manliness into him.' Of course, that was only his way. Just another of his jokes, because, as I've told you, he hated the sea like poison . . ."

Simon had never been fond of Mr. Smith, but it seemed to him that Mr. Mountford would not have been much of an improvement. He continued, however, to smile with his mother over those happy, remote days which had followed her only lengthy courtship.

"And so, you see," said the Countess, "it's natural I should

feel that the happiest marriages are made after due consideration, and that in your case there is no real hurry."

"But great gracious, milady, there is," said Hansi, and the flower of her face became more sweet than ever. A faint and becoming blush mounted under the creamy skin. She put her knitting aside, lowered her eyes modestly, and folded her hands on her pretty dress which was bright and fresh with the buds of Spring. "There is indeed with us the great hurry."

"Ah, youth!" said the Countess. "Always rushing on, so eager, so impulsive—!"

"That is just how it is," said Hansi, still very demurely. "It is our Peter that has gone rushing on, so eager, so impulsive. He—"

"Isn't it funny?" the Countess interposed. "A mother can never see her son in the role of a lover. The very thought makes her smile. She regards him always as only a little boy. And yet you say, Hansi, that he's ardent, dashing—that he swept you right off your feet?"

"That just is what I say," said Hansi. "And now, my so dear milady, there is your grandson to be thinking about."

If Simon had not been of such a happy and placid nature—if he hadn't been, as Spike always said, something of a philosopher in his own way—he might have exclaimed at this, and even been angry and caused a scene. Built as he was, he merely sat puffing his cigarette and listening with quiet attention.

The Countess warmed and glowed; her round eyes, so like a dolls', moistened and shone with emotion.

"A grandmother at thirty-five!" she said, hushed but glad, communing with her own heart. "What a beautiful thought! A grandmother! And I still feel only a girl—only a slip of a girl. A little jolly baby boy to call me Granny. Oh, how I wish your poor dear father was here, Simon."

"Yes, mother," said Simon civilly, though he doubted whether Mr. Mountford would have been enjoying himself.

"Perhaps, however, it's as well he's not, since we're at sea, Peter. He wouldn't have been able to appreciate even this news in the circumstances. In fact, supposing he'd been spared he wouldn't have been here to hear it. Nothing would have persuaded him to set foot on a yacht. But that's really

beside the point as he's passed on. We must not look back but forward. A bouncing baby boy to carry on the name of Mountford! Whoopee!—I'm so proud, so delighted!"

"I too am proud and delighted," said Hansi.

"I'll lay a hundred to one on you are, dear child," said the Countess. "And what about you, darling Peter? Aren't you bucked to the wide?"

Wisely Simon did not attempt to put his feelings into words, but the smile he gave her sufficed.

"I think it's simply perfect," said the Countess.

"Then that is good that we are all so happy, and the sooner we are at Egypt and married properly the better," Hansi pointed out.

"How practical and wise you are, Hansi," said the Countess. "You're going to make a wonderful wife in every way. I shan't be losing Peter. I shall be gaining a daughter and a grandson. I—" She broke off suddenly, as new aspects of the matter occurred to her—aspects which she had overlooked in her first flood of maternal joy. She sat up startled. "But you've only been aboard a few days, Hansi. You mean—?"

Hansi raised her head. Her eyes were starry; her lips wore a little smile of happiness and yet they trembled just a little, like a child's.

"We did love at first sight, milady," she said simply.

"How romantic!" cried the Countess. "How natural! That's Nature's way. The two flames leap together. They are one. I suppose I should be very cross with you two naughty children, but I can't find it in my heart. I was young, too, once. I know, I understand."

"Then too, milady, you will understand why there is need to hurry," said Hansi, keeping to the main point in a manner which showed she had a wise head on her shoulders although she looked like an enchanted little girl.

"Why, yes, of course," said the Countess, showing that she, too, could be practical as well as romantic. "Couldn't have the poor little blighter born on the wrong side of the blanket." Her deep laugh came at the very thought. "You must be married in Alexandria, as soon as possible. There's one good thing about a yacht—there are no neighbours to stick their noses into what isn't their business, and starting to count on

their fingers. Though it's all happened so quickly," she added, counting on her fingers herself in a vague way, "that nobody could ever be the wiser. That's very comforting. Under all my good nature I'm really a very conventional woman. Yes, seeing what a pair of naughty sillies you've been, everything's going to be fine. Of course, there'll have to be a delay. Clothes and so on. You'll want a white wedding, of course?"

"That would be so fine," sighed Hansi in the way of any girl in love.

"You'll make a beautiful bride," said the Countess. "And Peter'll look stunning. Oh, I know I shall cry and be so happy. Listen!—I've a wonderful idea. Let's do it in style. There must be a cathedral in a big place like Alexandria. We'll have it there. And all the Depressed People shall be bridesmaids. That'll cheer 'em up no end, and give them a nice start in their new lives. Everyone loves to be a bridesmaid, and Peter will give them really handsome presents. What a wedding! I only wish your poor dear father and mother could be there, Hansi! Now let me see, I think I'll wear . . ."

Simon didn't listen to his mother's long consideration of her problem. It was no use planning ahead aboard the *Stormalong*. That was why he was quite unconcerned. This wedding, which would have made him a bigamist and put a fine rod in Daphne's hand, would never take place. Poor dear mother!—she would never learn.

He looked at Hansi. The thought of all these splendours had set her dreaming, too. Poor Hansi! And yet, when next she found a chance to get a word in, she showed her good sense in clinging to the fact that marriage to Peter Mountford was what mattered. The splendours could come afterwards.

"You are so good, so kind, to poor little Hansi," she said with deep emotion. "You fill my heart. See, I kiss the hand." She leaned across with pretty impulsiveness, and did so, leaving a little smear of lipstick on the dimpled knuckles. "But this we are forgetting in these so fine schemes. They would take the ages and ages. There is the grandson to think of always. And for me I do not want any great thing at all, but just to be married to mine lover, mine Peter."

She gave him a shining glance of adoration. A man with a heart of stone would have been touched by it, and Simon's

heart was very far from stone. His mother didn't miss that glance either. She had always been a great one for youth and the high romance and such things. In just this way she had looked at the Button King when people had tried to come between them. She told Hansi and Simon about it.

" . . . So you see I know just how you feel, you dearest daughter-to-be. And you shall have your wish. I've had another idea that's right out of the bag. Nothing to stop us having the slap-up affair later, but in the meantime let's get Captain Pam to marry you here in our dear old *Stormalong!*!"

She flung out her arms in a gesture which embraced the yacht on which they voyaged so happily.

The idea, however, didn't appeal to Hansi at all. A shiver ran through her, and all the roses drained out of her face. She shook her head in violent rejection.

"No, no, no!" she protested. "That I am not liking at all. That would be the worst of worst things. Oh, great gracious, I am feeling killed quite dead at the thought."

The Countess laughed indulgently.

"You funny pet," she said. "There's no pleasing you. Still, a girl has a right to be choosey about her own wedding. I remember when I was married to the dear Count he wanted it just quiet and informal, but I insisted on doing it in style. I remember. . . And if I had my way on that occasion why shouldn't you have yours now, Hansi? Come, what say we just go along to the registrar's and make a quick job of it?"

"Oh," said Hansi, clapping her hands, "that then would be so fine and grand and more than all those cathedrals. That is what your Hansi wants, my so dear lady."

"Then that is what my Hansi shall have," said the Countess. "A grandson!—what a lovely birthday present!"

"Birthday, mother?" said Simon.

"There, it's slipped out," said the Countess. "What an old silly I am! It was going to be a surprise. Only Dr. John and Captain Pam know about it. Oh, and the chef, of course, for he's making a cake. How the years fly by! Thirty-five candles! And it seems only yesterday that there were only twenty."

Simon jumped to his feet and kissed his mother, hugging her and wishing her many happy returns.

"Dear boy!" she said. "Dear happy father-to-be!"

Hansi had risen. She stood wistfully before the Countess, her fingers twining shyly in her dress.

"Is it too soon that I should kiss you?" she asked in sweet diffidence.

"Bless you, you dear innocent," laughed the Countess. "If you're giving me a grandson, surely we needn't be all formal and distant now."

So Hansi kissed the Countess, too. She did it quite charmingly, as Simon had every cause to know she would.

"It's going to be such a lovely party," said the Countess. "Flags and lights and music and dancing. There'll be gallons of drinks, and the Depressed People are going to join in because I've really got quite fond of them now, for your sake, Hansi, and because to-morrow afternoon we shall be at Alexandria and rid of the whole wretched gang."

"To-morrow afternoon?" said Hansi, eyes widening.

"Can't you hear the wedding bells?" cried the Countess. "Ding-dong-dell! Isn't it lucky we're having the party? We shall be able to announce your engagement!"

But Hansi, in the modesty of her girlhood, did not crave announcements and publicity. Obviously to her marriage was a sacred and private matter.

She dropped down on her knees on the deck before the Countess, and clasped her hands in appeal.

"Dear so dear milady," she said, "please not this to do! Please not to breathe a word to not anyone at all until mine Peter and I are safely married and on the dry land. Perhaps I am silly and have superstition, but this is what I pray to you and you must grant to me because I give you the so fine grandson."

The Countess was the last person to deny such a plea. She laid her hand fondly on that golden head, and said, "You quaint, funny little creature, but if you wish it so then that's the way it is. In a way, though you mayn't understand this, I think you're wise to be superstitious. I've always found that as soon as one announces an engagement aboard the *Stormalong* things have a way of going all cock-eyed. It's a bet, Hansi. We'll keep it right under our hats."

Happy again, Hansi returned to her chair. The Captain's voice came down the wind, calling for Simon to take over the

wheel. He stood at the wheelhouse door, a sailorly and handsome figure.

Simon hastened to obey. As he did so Hansi took up her knitting, smiling, glowing, with everything arranged to her satisfaction.

"Better drop that now, dear," said the Countess. "Little garments—!"

Captain Pamphillion glanced sharply at Simon. As usual, he would have liked to have known what they'd been talking about in the stern. Now that Hansi was there also his curiosity was even stronger. Simon's face, so handsome, so classic in every feature, was quite unreadable. Captain Pamphillion greeted the quartermaster with a friendly word and gave him the course. Nothing had been said, or would ever be said, about the incident of the revolver the previous evening. That had been left astern.

The yacht needed watching in this sea. Simon concentrated on the job. If he had been living in any world save the *Stormalong* even he would have been very angry with Hansi. She had brought back memories of Daphne and that other imaginary baby which had made him a prisoner before ever he was a prisoner-of-war. As things stood, however, he could afford to smile in a whimsical and remote way. Poor silly Hansi, who thought she was being so clever! Poor silly kid! There was no future in it.

II

Simon had taken over the wheel for the first dog watch, from four to six. All these nautical terms were familiar to him now as he'd known they would be in due course back on that distant day when Captain Pamphillion had shown him over the *Stormalong*, and he'd been surprised to find that the room called the saloon was not a bar. Simon turned the spokes and watched the compass. His task was easier now, for sea and wind had died down in the past hour. The air was still and warm, the sea as glassy as it had ever been. Lightning flashed and flickered about the horizon but it was far away, and the grumblings of the thunder were remote. Given anything like

luck it promised to be a perfect evening for the birthday party.

Because of Hansi's lie about the baby his thoughts wandered back to Royals Bottom, and he wondered whether Daphne planned to re-marry and if so who was the unlucky man. Not, he fancied, the chap with the patent leather hair who'd been so enthusiastic at the holiday camp that first day. He wasn't the marrying type. He wondered, also, about Miss Enid. In those old days and back in the narrow world she'd been as high above him as a star. Perhaps if they had met in the big wide world where people went yachting all might have been different, and certainly though she was so cool and quiet and friendly, Miss Enid might well have been nicer than any of the very nice girls he had met. But, of course, she belonged to Royals Bottom even though she dwelt outside in the big house on the hill. He couldn't begin to imagine her in any port where the *Stormalong* chanced to call. She wasn't an adventure. She was just Miss Enid of Chingley Lodge. That was a pity in a way, but also a fact. Simon knew a fact when he saw one even in this strange environment where nothing was real.

Spike, pausing in the midst of his many and interesting duties, poked his red head into the wheelhouse.

"Thirty-five candles! Lumme, it's a good thing she kids herself, or it'd have to be the hell of a whopping great cake. The old dame's resting before the junketings, so you're eating for'ard. Just as well. All hell's a-poppin.' Wait till you hear. Suits me down to the ground. More time with Zaza. Just what the doctor ordered, though I don't mean Dr. John. There's a proper tough baby, that Zaza, and it needs a hard case to handle her. Course I'm the very guy."

He gave a big and knowing wink, and hurried off without saying a word about marriage or the little quiet pub. Another plan, another dream, had gone all wrong. Simon couldn't feel sorry for Spike. It had to be.

Nor did he puzzle about the enigmatic warning that hell was a-popping. He might be Simple Simon but he had too much sense to worry about that. He would find out at six o'clock, or by then it might be over and left behind along with all the rest.

He turned the spokes and watched his lively friend in the small house of glass and brass. As he struck four bells Caleb

relieved him. The evening had turned hotter, and Caleb had lifted his flannel vest to scratch his stomach. The girls tattooed in red and black aimed shrewd kicks but never connected with that elusive football.

"Mr. Meggsy waiting for you, Simon," he said. "Plenty of trouble ahead, but I must admit he's convinced me. Yes, right's right. I hope you'll stick along with the boys, Simon, but that's up to you. Still, you're all right. We can trust you anyway. We all figured that."

"You can trust me all right, whatever it is," said Simon.

"That's just what we figured, and it's a funny thing because, seeing you're Simon and not Peter you must be crooked as all the rest of 'em aft, but somehow it don't seem that way." He bit a lump from a plug of black tobacco and tucked it in his jaw. "A rum go," he said, stepping on to the grating, "but then there are lots of rum goes in this here packet. Practically everything. Better get along. Your dinner's on the table and Mr. Meggsy's not in any state of mind to be kept hanging about."

Mr. Meggsy was alone in the fo'c'sle. He sat in his own chair, the Bible open before him and what he read there seemed to be giving him satisfaction, for his bald head nodded slowly. He closed the book as Simon entered. The shock of the morning had worn off, but he was still far from the old, aloof Mr. Meggsy. His jaw was set; fire glowed deep in his eyes.

"Sit down, Simon, sit down," he said. "Which side are you on, laddie—the Lord's or Lucifer's? Don't bother to answer, Simon, for if I didn't know I'd not be speaking with you. There be great things afoot and this vessel is to become a vessel of wrath for the evildoers. We have made our plans, and shall carry them out, have no fear of that."

More plans! More schemes! If Simon hadn't been the most patient of men his stocks of that virtue would have been exhausted. Now it seemed that the folly had infected the fo'c'sle where so recently all had been peace and ha'penny nap. It was a disease which spread like a poison. But Simon didn't even sigh.

"And what might your plans be, Mr. Meggsy?"

Mr. Meggsy clenched his fist and struck the table.

"Mutiny!" he said. "Mutiny on the high seas." He found a grim enjoyment in the words. "We are British sailors, and we're decided that the wicked must be cast down. At four bells in the middle watch to-morrow we are going to seize the ship—we, the crew, the decent people."

"Are you?" asked Simon, much interested, of course, for being quite a sailor by now he realized that this was a drastic step and he had a great regard for his caravan, the *Stormalong*. "And why are you going to do that, Mr. Meggsy?"

"Because no ship flying the British ensign is going to be used as a slave ship—a white slave ship. We refuse to have any part in such a venture. And what's more we refuse to allow it to go on. That pair are the unrighteous and evil ones. We are six against two, and with all their cunning they shall not prevail. We shall make them prisoners, and if they put up a fight that might suit us well. There are a lot of deaths to be avenged, including this latest murder of a poor, harmless steward-laddie. Let the devils fight if they dare."

"And then, Mr. Meggsy?"

"And then, Simon, we turn the *Stormalong* about. We have no trust in those Gyppos, knowing them. If Captain Pamphillion will navigate at the point of a gun, we have a gun. If he won't he'll be a prisoner or dead, and Spike has enough knowledge to get us back to Malta or, if he misses the isle, to some places where we can hand ship and girls over to the proper authorities. Some of the women are bad and bold, but that's not the point. The point is that we are not going to allow them to be sold into slavery in the brothels of Alex' and the like. We have seen such places in the green folly of our youth. I have meself. I make no secret of it. We know that we are taking them to worse than death, and we'll not do it, and there's an end."

Had Simon considered this from a purely personal point of view he might have been well pleased to think that they would not be arriving at Alexandria to-morrow afternoon. Under this new arrangement he might enjoy a little more of Hansi's delightful company without being committed to most awkward explanations, in the course of which, among other things, he would have to confess to his mother that he had made a disastrous marriage without her knowledge and

consent. His only other course was to commit bigamy under an assumed name. Therefore any delay was desirable. But to do him justice none of these considerations arose. Mr. Meggsy's plans struck him as most worthy and creditable. But he also had no faith in them; they didn't matter. They were concerned with To-morrow.

"Your position, laddie," said Mr. Meggsy, quite kindly, for he was fond of Simon, "is most peculiar. We recognize that. You are not her son, but in many ways you're better for the poor lady than her own son may well have been by all reports. We are not asking you to come in with us, but simply to stand on one side, which is a thing you're well fitted to do with your nature. Then to-morrow morn, we'll ask you to explain to her what's happened in your own way, and make her see that we've done her a great service, and get her to back us. It's little and all to ask, and you'll not go to gaol as it's like enough we shall."

"I don't think you'll go to gaol, Mr. Meggsy," said Simon. "After all that's happened aboard that'd be hardly fair. I should think if you ever get round to doing it, it'll be forgotten once it's over. And I'll certainly do as you wish about the Countess—that is as long as the mutiny happens after her birthday party. She's set her heart on that."

"Poor hoodwinked soul," said Mr. Meggsy, "she deserves a bit of enjoyment, and we'll see it's not spoilt. I give you my word on that."

"Then it's a deal," said Simon.

"Ay, laddie," said Mr. Meggsy, re-opening his Bible, "we knew your heart was in the right place."

Simon started on his supper, which, in view of the festivities to follow, was just a cold snack. He didn't congratulate himself on the fact that this unexpected change in the course of events, if successful, would free him from the imminent threat of death. He merely munched away heartily and didn't bother his head. Little wonder his digestion never troubled him.

Besides time was running short. He'd promised Captain Pamphillion that he would take over the rest of the second dog watch to allow those more versed in such matters to see to the decorations.

His mother's party was in Today.

III

There was, of course, a very great deal of the boy in Simon. In fact, apart from his looks, much of his charm lay in the fact that he had never grown up to barter away innocence and naturalness for worldly knowledge and foresight and cunning and all the other dreary assets of an adult. The cribbed and narrow channels down which most of his life had run had had much to do with this. And who can say how much of the rest was due to the baptismal chance which had made him Simon—Simple Simon? The name fitted him to perfection, but might not he, being of such a gentle and easy nature, also have fitted himself, instinctively, without thought to the name?

All the boy in Simon was pleased that he had taken this extra turn at the wheel. It prolonged anticipation and meant that he would step into the party when all the preparations were over, when it was in full swing, when the scene had been properly set and the fun had begun. The Smiths had never indulged in birthday parties at The Pheasant. Mr. Smith had no time for foolishness, and certainly no pleasure in Simon's birthday. True, sometimes they had had birthday parties in the Stalaglufts, but they were in the nature of rags organized more from courage than real high spirits. This was going to be a very different affair.

And so he concentrated on his nimble friend, the compass, and when he raised his eyes it was only to look ahead in the course of duty. Never once did he step to the door and take a glance aft. That would have spoilt the fun.

The evening was hot and fine with thunder and lightning still remote on the rim of the world where the low purple battlements of cloud were drenched in gold and rose. The sea was a polished mirror.

The gramophone began to play. An amplifier had been fitted to it, and the music was loud and cheerful in the quiet of the hour. Laughter and the high chatter of many voices drifted in. There was an excitement and an animation in the air which, along with the noise, suggested a fairground. Simon's gypsy blood responded; his feet tapped time on the grating. He was looking, as Hansi would say, so fine and grand in one

of Captain Pamphillion's best white outfits. Though he might be in debt to his mother for his life, he still owed his wardrobe to the kindness of Captain Pam who had come near to shooting him.

In this mood he wasn't cross when Caleb was twenty minutes late. Indeed, it would have been hard to be cross with Caleb at the moment, for he was mightily pleased with himself and chuckling so deeply that Simon knew the invisible girls were at practise again. Not to mention the lion and the snake and so on. Caleb's skin had, as it were, a private life of its own.

"By the Sailor," said Caleb, "it's a proper do. Sorry I'm late, Simon, but I been dancing with Cayenne. She may be a tart, but she's a good one, and I got nothing against tarts either. Been my only girl-friends for years. Swell dancer. Not just this new-fangled stuff. We did a proper old one-two-three waltz. It's a bit crowded, of course, but it's fun. None of 'em seems to wear stays. Very matey. And what's more I got a date with Cayenne after"—he lowered his voice—"you-know-what. Glad you're in with us, Simon."

"That should be fun, too," said Simon. He had completely forgotten the mutiny, but, reminded of it now, he realized that if it ever happened it wouldn't be anything serious and would be quite different from other mutinies. Even murder and sudden death had never meant anything in the *Stormalong*.

"Don't know about that so much," said Caleb, "but my date's going to be. Cayenne won't half be grateful to one of her noble rescuers. And I won't be just a deck-hand any more. For a while anyway I'll be a boss, a big shot, giving the orders instead of taking 'em. And there'll be some sore heads tomorrow even apart from you-know-what. Lashin's of grog. Talk about join the navy and see the world! This is going to be a night."

It was already a night.

Simon stepped out of the wheelhouse and paused to enjoy his delayed inspection of the scene.

The beautiful white yacht was more than ever like something at the pictures in the Blickington Regal. She sailed through the violet twilight, hung with the flags of all nations, strings of coloured electric lamps running from the masthead

to each rail and the stern. The deck usually so dim was brilliant, and the glassy sea on either hand rainbow-hued. The girls had put on their best, and their best ran to a lot more colour, every colour there was, it seemed, so long as it was sufficiently bright.

The narrow deck was crowded with dancing couples. A tango was being played, and, as well as space allowed, everybody was out to show their paces. Most of the girls, of course, had to dance with each other, but such partners as were available were on duty. The two engineers were there, and even the chef, who dwelt apart from the rest of the yacht in his handsome galley and the cabin adjoining, paced stolidly with a plump brunette. Captain Pamphillion, with a dignity worthy of his office, held Hansi closely to make sure that her steps didn't become too intricate, and Spike, his red hair plastered stylishly on his brow, was learning from Zaza that these fancy, dago dances could be lots of fun. Mr. Meggsy wasn't there. He could have been, but, as was only proper and natural as matters stood, he had elected to remain with his motors which knew not good or evil but attended to their business. Simon wondered which was Fifi.

Delighted with the picture he worked his way aft, thrust into the scuppers by the happy dancers. As he neared the stern he saw a trestle table had been erected there. It sagged under a weight of good things in bottles and on dishes. Certainly the owner had not stinted anything; certainly the chef had earned this unwonted hour of relaxation. In the middle of the feast the tiered cake towered up, a snowy mountain crowned with the thirty-five candles waiting to be lit.

Behind the table opulent rugs had been spread and there were many more flags and lamps. The Countess sat enthroned. She should have worn a crown or at least a tiara. But Mary Jane, of course, had stolen all such things. The Countess had substituted ostrich feathers. They nodded proudly, whitely. Her dress was cut very low, and Simon couldn't imagine how it was kept up, for it had nothing across the shoulders or arms at all. Her new companion had not stinted her in the matter of make-up. She was a work of art from the topmost sausage curl to as far as the eye could reach, which was a long way.

Her gown sparkled and glittered with sequins or something of that kind—it cased her in shining armour.

Simon paused again to consider this picture. He was proud and pleased. His mother might be thirty-five—or even sixty-five—but she wasn't afraid to let herself go in a big way. She did look a bit like a huge baby dressed up, but why not? This was a birthday party.

Dr. John was with her, very smart in white duck mess jacket and all. He, too, was evidently determined that the affair should be a success, for he was leaning forward and twittering away with great earnestness and vivacity. Whatever he was saying the Countess seemed delighted. She laughed and made eyes at him over a large ostrich feather fan. At moments she furled it and tapped him gaily with the plumpy sceptre. Dr. John, in turn, chided her merrily with tiny, bony forefinger.

They were having such a high old time that Simon hesitated to intrude, but as he was in danger of being bumped over the side, and felt that he owed his mother congratulations, he did so. Dr. John, obviously, wasn't pleased to be interrupted, and hunched his shoulders sulkily, but the Countess was as delighted as ever to see her boy.

"Darling Peter!" she said, offering her cheek to be kissed. Simon touched it carefully with his lips, not wishing to spoil the mask of lilies and roses. "How wonderful you are, working away when everybody else is gallivanting! If only we weren't at sea, and your dear father were here! The more money he made the harder he worked, and he'd be so proud to see that though you have all his money now you can still turn your hand to honest labour."

At this remark Dr. John darted a keen glace at Simon, but Simon had nothing to conceal. He was in no way connected with the Lost Dogs' Home.

"How do I look, Peter darling? Not so dusty for thirty-five?"

"Not so dusty for any age," said Simon truthfully.

"And what do you think of my party?"

"It's grand, mother."

"We must celebrate everybody's birthday in future," the Countess decided. "I've been slacking. I've let life get dull and flat. From now on we're going to have much more fun, and not so many murders and police and all that tiresome nonsense."

We've been bored, that's the whole trouble. Dear Dr. John, this is such an occasion. Do you think I can have another glass of wine?"

"To show what I think, Hilda," said Dr. John gallantly, "I shall get you one myself."

He took her glass to the table.

"Such a fine man, Peter," said the Countess. "And though he's strict, he can be very generous and sensible at moments. After all, neither of us might be here if it wasn't for him. In various ways we all owe our lives to Dr. John."

"Yes, mother," Simon agreed.

"And he's been so absolutely charming. I don't think I've ever felt so flattered. He's just been—"

But the dance was over, and she was interrupted by the return of Captain Pam and Hansi, and the surge of guests to the buffet.

"Poor darlings," said the Countess, peering at the mass of colours which must have looked to her rather like a flower garden seen through mist, "I don't think they've been badly looked after on board, but being Depressed People they naturally have a lot of eating and drinking to make up. It's lovely to see them. Did you enjoy your dance, dear?"

"My gracious," said Hansi, "the Captain he dances like the fairy."

Captain Pamphillion mopped.

"Felt like a ton of bricks compared with Hansi," he declared gallantly. "Nothing much of the fairy about me, eh, Peter? Dr. John?"

The Countess joined the men in laughter, but Hansi's eyes remained wide and innocent.

"Dr. John," the Countess said, "I've an idea. In view of what we've been talking about, why don't you and Captain Pam go along to the cabin and have a quiet drink and chat? He looks as if he could do with a rest."

This simple suggestion caused the two old friends to regard each other in a strange and suspicious way. The high spirits seemed to drain out of them. It was almost as if each feared the other had been up to some roguery.

"Well, Captain Pam," said Dr. John, "you certainly look as if you could do with a spell. A man of your age—"

"And you don't seem to be much of a dancer, Dr. John," said Captain Pamphillion. "I'll join you by all means."

They went away together, the one so big and cumbersome, the other so tiny and stepping neatly on his little feet.

"Dear boys," sighed the Countess. "Very dear, but I've seen quite a lot of them, and I wanted a moment alone with the four of us.

"Here are only three," said Hansi.

The Countess shook her fan.

"Oh, Hansi—!" she said in playful and affectionate reproach. Hansi blushed, lowered her eyes, and curled her fingers in the sides of her simple but most becoming blue gown. "There, I was only joking. You mustn't overdo it, Hansi, on account of Junior, but another reason I sent those two old bores away was so that I could watch my precious pair dancing. You'll make a perfect couple. So striking—you being so tall and dark, Peter, and you so small and fair, Hansi. I must admit I still regret it's not going to be slap-up, regardless, white wedding."

Hansi raised her head immediately.

"But please it is best as I wish," she said. "Is it not a wonder to think that perhaps this time to-morrow I shall be truly your daughter and your grandson will be having the proper name?"

"Of course, dear girl! And how right you are to put the little perisher before your own vanity. Really, you're an object lesson to me. The music's going to start again in a minute. Just let's have one drink—the four of us."

Simon replenished the glasses.

"Here's to the quartette," said the Countess, quite forgetting that Paul had once been going to be the other young man. "Down the hatch."

"A slow-fox," said Hansi, shining. "You do dance good, mine Peter?"

"I only stumble around," said Simon. "I haven't done much, Hansi."

"We do dance good, mine Peter," said Hansi. "We two are one. That is what makes so fine dancing."

Simon found there was a lot in what she said. They fitted very naturally together, and he had no difficulty in following

her movements. Hansi as usual was kind. If she wanted to do elaborate steps, she checked her feet. Enough for her to be in the arms of her betrothed, and look up at him with love and passion in the blue lakes of her eyes; enough for her to feel the beloved so close to her; enough for her to whisper to him sweet secrets for their ears alone.

"Mine Peter isn't cross with his Hansi?"

"Cross? Me? I'm never cross, Hansi."

"That I do know, mine darling. Great gracious, I did love you a lot to tell the great big lie about the little baby. I don't think for anybody else in the world could I tell such a great lie to your dear mother that is so kind and good to me. No, not for anyone."

"I'm sure of that, Hansi," Simon agreed with complete conviction, for she would have been a fool to do so, and whatever Hansi might be she wasn't a fool.

"It is only that you are my so great old snail," she said, snuggling closer, so that, despite Simon's size, they took up much less room on the crowded deck than any other couple. "You are quick and easy in what you do, but when it is the talk then you don't have any words. I am thinking you would forget for months to say to this your lover, 'Hansi, marry to me.' You would want to, yes, but you would not get those words out. And so for both I must speak a naughty lie. It is what you call the white lie, mine Peter?"

"That's what we call it, darling Hansi." Simon could hardly have said less. Even in other circumstances he wasn't one to bear malice.

"And see how much I love you, mine lover, that I don't even want that so great and fine wedding because that would mean for a longer time I am not your proper wife but only your improper little Hansi."

So the young folk chattered on, and Simon had never enjoyed a dance a fraction as much. Obviously, his mother approved also. She clapped her hands each time they passed, and when the music ended her enthusiasm knew no bounds.

"Well, live and learn!" she said, handing her glass to Simon. "I've always thought Wilson was a pretty hot number, and that you didn't know anything about such sophisticated things, Peter, but you dear innocents have opened my eyes. A mother

never realizes how the right girl can bring out her schoolboy. Really, it's a revelation. You're quite right, Hansi. I think you should be married to-morrow at the latest. It would never do to wait for a lot of bridal gowns and so on. Thank you, dear boy. And regardless of Junior I do feel you'd both better have a drink. You must be quite on fire."

"I burn," said Hansi with lovely candour, and lowered her eyes again.

"So do all the Depressed People," said the Countess, "though not, of course, so prettily. It's just as well we've all been most abstemious up to now, or I doubt if supplies would hold out."

The thirst and hunger on the other side of the trestle table continued unabated. Zaza and Spike, arms entwined, were drinking from each other's glasses, and Zaza had placed a large lettuce leaf on her partner's head. The engineers had forgotten Mr. Meggsy and the motors; the chef was drinking red wine from the bottle; the girls in their various ways were as happy as could be. They danced even between the dances; they needed no music to make them sing.

"Charming," said the Countess, screwing up her eyes in an effort to see better, "charming! Quite the nicest lot of guests I've ever entertained. But what a mercy of God it is that we shall be in Alexandria to-morrow and rid of the whole bawdy crew. Talking of that, Peter, I must remember to change my will."

Hansi, in her dual role of companion to an elderly lady and prospective daughter-in-law, was naturally arrested by that brief and important word.

"Your will, milady?" she asked, helpful and businesslike immediately for all the distractions.

"Aren't I a silly old woman?" asked the Countess, waving her glass in one hand and her fan in the other. "You'll never believe it, Hansi, but a few days ago I made a will leaving everything to the Home for Lost Dogs at Battersea."

Hansi shook her head sharply as if she felt something was wrong with her hearing.

"Please? Pardon?"

"Lost Dogs," said the Countess. "Foolish, really. I hate the pests."

"But your son, mine Peter," Hansi asked, her hand closing protectively over Simon's. "What then of him?"

"Bless your dear heart," laughed the Countess. "Peter's not the one who'll ever bother about money. It doesn't mean a thing to him. He wouldn't care if his old mother hadn't a red cent. Isn't that so, my lamb?"

"Of course, mother," said Simon, and Hansi's face was a pretty study in amazement as she realized that both were speaking plain truth.

"That's why I love him so, and why you must love him, Hansi. You'll find when you are rich that people will only love you for what they can get out of you."

Hansi's amazement gave place to happier emotion.

"When I am rich—?"

"Yes, yes, yes, silly," said the Countess, giving the girl's knee a little spanking with her feathery fan. "Of course! Everything is changed now. There is Junior to think of. He will probably be a horrible little money-grubber, like his dear grandfather. He'll want all kinds of things. Oh, yes, whether he wishes it so or not, Peter must come in for all my dough now. I only thank my stars he'll have you to manage it for him. I don't honestly believe he knows the difference between ten bob and a monkey. Do you, darling?"

"No, mother."

"You see what I mean, Hansi? It'll all be up to you, and I must count on your sound sense. When I think of poor Peter trying to manage heaven only knows how many millions—!"

Hansi slipped out of her chair, in that pretty way of hers, and kneeling on the fine rug, claimed the Countess's hands. Beauty shone from her like the light from the reborn stars.

"So dear milady," she said, "you must not to worry and fret. Now that mine Peter has me he need not to trouble. I am wise enough for two"—she drooped her golden head again—"or three or half-a-dozen. Oh, I am hoping it is twelve."

"And so am I! Imagine twelve little grandsons! At my age! And now go and dance, children. Just to watch you makes me feel young again."

Peter was more precious than ever to Hansi through the

one-step, and she succeeded in making that plain, though it would have seemed impossible.

"Mine so fine and grand lover," said Hansi, "great gracious, we must get hold of that so mad will and tear it into little bits."

"Don't get in a state, sweetheart," said Simon. "That's probably been done already, or Dr. John and Captain Pam are doing it at this moment. They're up to some dirty work I'll bet."

"But supposing then," said little Hansi, clinging closer to his strength and certainty, "they don't find that will and they are to kill her this night before ever we are at Alexandria?"

"Nobody's going to kill mother to-night," said Simon. "There are far too many people about. Don't worry, little sweetheart. Why, Hansi, you're trembling! Don't be such a soft-hearted kid. Mother's going to be all right."

"And us? What of us, mine Peter?"

"We're safe as houses to-night anyway."

"And to-morrow she changes the madness will?"

"I suppose so, Hansi," said Simon. He was enjoying the dance far too much to go into a lot of explanations about how life wagged aboard the *Stormalong*.

"Lovely!" the Countess applauded when they rejoined her. "Absolutely red 'ot. I do wish the poor, dear Count were with us to-night. You wouldn't half put his perfect profile out of joint, Peter. Honestly, I'm enchanted. But for little Hansi and little Junior you'd make a fortune for yourself as a gigolo, which is more than your poor dear father would ever have done. We really must try to arrange that séance in Egypt. I'll bet there'll be showers and showers of buttons, instead of tambourines and trumpets. Fancy your father being made a grandfather after such a time! He'll have to be thrilled to the back teeth no matter how amusing things are on the other side." She tapped herself in reproach with her fan. "How I run on," she chided, "and I haven't even got round to telling you the lovely, lovely news."

Hansi was indeed the perfect companion. She knew her mistress extremely well already. At this mention of news the clouds dimmed the twin lakes, and her smooth brow crinkled.

"What news are you having, dear darling milady, great gracious?"

"Sweet!" said the Countess gratefully. "I should have told you ages ago, but there's been so much to see, what with you two dancing and everything that I've been absurdly forgetful. My head's been in a whirl. Dear Simon, dear Hansi, I've had two proposals of marriage to-night. Just imagine! At my age—on my thirty-fifth birthday!"

Hansi was shocked and startled into silence, but Simon, the old hand, merely asked, as was seemly, "Who is it this time, mother?"

"You dear boy," the Countess approved, "you're always as solid and safe as the Rock of Gibraltar. A most restful person. Why, Dr. John and Captain Pam, of course. Who else could it be? They've been wooing me for ages, naturally. They've often asked me to marry them, but I've not felt like settling down. This evening, however, they both seemed to feel that things were reaching a climax of some kind, and it was a case of now or never. Oddly enough, I had the same kind of silly notion. It was the strangest thing. Captain Pam proposed first, and I wanted a little time to think. That was why I sent him off to dance with you, Hansi, when you chanced along just at the right moment. And he'd no sooner gone than Dr. John took his chair, and bless me, if he didn't ask for my hand, too, and in much the same sort of urgent way. It was really most flattering. I don't suppose many women have a double proposal on their thirty-fifth birthday."

She sat back, plumes nodding, fan waving, regal and yet, to Simon, also a very huge and dimpled baby.

"And almost a grandmother," she added proudly.

"But these mens they are—" Hansi exclaimed and broke off. She was still a novice aboard the *Stormalong*, out of her depth. She had enough sense to recognize that, and, with everything at stake, dared not finish the sentence.

The situation was quite simple to Simple Simon.

"And are you going to marry one of them, mother?"

The Countess leaned forward and straddled her legs a little, clamping her feet firmly on the deck, getting down to business.

"I think I must, Simon," she said. "That's the only way

there's any safety. It's the only way I'll ever get away from them. If I accept Dr. John perhaps something will happen to him, and then there'll only be Captain Pam, and I could marry him. Or, of course, the other way round if I started with dear Captain Pam."

"I see what you mean, mother." Simon only just managed to keep the sadness out of his voice. He hated to hear his mother talking in this logical way, reasoning, planning ahead, almost plotting. It wasn't like her at all. But in the next breath he saw that this was hardly fair. To her proposals of marriage were things that happened in the ordinary way of life and you accepted and that was that. Nothing much came of them. There was no sound reason why she should view these later offers any differently from the others. Things would sort themselves out. "Which are you going to pick, mum?" he asked.

As ever, his use of the pet name touched the Countess. She blinked her spiky lashes.

"Precious!" she said. "But to get back to business. I simply can't make up my mind. They're both so dear to me, they've both been so near to me for such a very long, long time. It's like being asked to choose between identical marbles. And so I've left it to them."

"Great gracious," gasped Hansi, "you have now done that?" She was further than ever out of her depth; she wore a blank look of horror and dismay. Poor Hansi, mused Simon, aboard the *Stormalong*!

"Why not?" asked the Countess mildly. "I thought it a brilliant idea. I told Dr. John that dear Captain Pam had got in first again, and I suggested that the best course would be for them to go away and talk it out quietly over a drink. I can't marry them both, because that would be bigamy. I don't mind marrying either, because I've always been a big-hearted woman and not anxious to hurt anybody's feelings. It's up to them now to decide who wants to take the gamble. I think whichever does is a brave man—for at thirty-five I'm not the catch I was when your dear father landed me, Peter. They can't decently expect me to make a choice between them. It's up to them. I'm easy either way."

The music had started again.

"Oh, then, let us to dance, mine Peter," Hansi cried,

springing from her chair as if it had suddenly become red hot.
“Let us to dance.” Her voice and manner were quite wild.

“If you’ll excuse us, mother.”

“Bless you!” smiled the Countess.

It was a waltz and though Hansi clung as closely as ever her mind was on other matters so that they suffered a number of collisions. She didn’t even notice that, and Simon was quite sturdy enough to take the bouncing blows.

“Mine Peter,” Hansi whispered desperately, “now everything goes wrong. If either of those two bad mens marry to your mother then for us we are out of all, except perhaps that we are killed.”

“There’s nothing to get into a flat spin about, Hansi,” he said.

“Ah, but there is, there is, mine lover. There is you and me and the poor little baby.”

“There’s no use worrying about us,” said Simon, “and there isn’t any poor little baby, Hansi.”

“How do you know that?”

“Just happens I do,” said Simon, with certainty. It was the one lesson he had learnt from Daphne.

“But which does marry to her—then he will have her to tear up the Dogs’ will and make another. She is old and crazy. Anyone can do anything with her. What happens to all the money then?”

“That would depend, wouldn’t it?” Simon pointed out.

“You are mad,” said Hansi between her little white teeth.
“You are more mad than that one.”

“Perhaps,” said Simon.

They danced in silence after that, and the waltz wasn’t anything like the same success as the fox-trot or the one-step. Still, Simon held his partner tenderly and with great affection. Poor little Hansi! She remained in a flat spin. She was wracking her brains and trying to think up counterplots and find some course which would lead her to the millions. She was just like all the rest, and like all the rest she was wasting her time and energy. But she would only be cross and bitter if he told her that. He hummed the tune beneath his breath, and pressed Hansi to him. Never in all his life had he danced with

a partner one tenth as beautiful. He had to smile when he thought of the girls back at Royals Bottom.

He was sorry when the music stopped, and so was Hansi. She would have liked more time to think.

"Silly one!" said Simon, but Hansi gave her golden head an impatient shake. It wasn't sympathy she wanted.

The Countess showed an empty cigarette case.

"Would you mind, Hansi dear—? And perhaps you might bring me a light scarf—any of them so long as it's gay." Hansi took the case with a pretty eagerness to be of service. The Countess smiled. "There's no great rush, dear," she said. "Powder your nose if you like. I've been smoking like a chimney, and it'll be all to the good if I'm without one for a while."

"You are that kind," said Hansi. "Perhaps I wash the face in cold water, and do it up again."

She hurried off, grateful and willing. Simon wagged his head just a little. Poor Hansi! Only a child! Even if she found the will and destroyed it, she would have achieved nothing.

The Countess tilted over slightly and took one of her pretty cigarettes from a pile beside her. It was a little crushed. Without comment, Simon supplied a flame, using the neat silver lighter which his friend Dr. John had lent to him.

"The vultures will be gathering again quite soon," said the Countess, "but I did want at least a minute or two with you, Peter, on this night in particular. I'm a little tight, darling, but just nicely tight, you know, so my muddled head is clearer than it usually is. Dear son, I want to thank you."

She spoke with such genuine warmth and feeling that Simple Simon's eyes suddenly saw her through a mist.

"But, mother," he said, "I've done nothing. It's you that's done everything for me, and been marvellous."

"Always so grateful, you dear. But what you don't realize is you've made me really happy for the first time in my life since you came back to me from the sea. It's been very lovely having you again, and no woman could have asked for a finer son. You've never demanded a thing, and you've given me love. To you I'm not just a crazy hag to be plucked and plundered and mocked. To you I'm your old mum. It wouldn't matter if I hadn't a farthing. I've met a lot of men in my time

—and what a long time it's been!—but I've never met a better than my son, Peter. It's funny, isn't it? You haven't done anything special or gone out of your way to please me, and yet you've made all these last weeks perfect. I suppose it is that you are honest and selfless and simple. I hope you stay always as you are. There, I mustn't get off on a crying jag, must I, darling? Only I wanted you to know how happy you've made me and how much I love you."

"You've made me happy, too," said Simon quietly but from his heart, "and I love you, mum. Nobody could ever have had a kinder, dearer mother."

"Oh," said the Countess, on a change of note, "I'm just a barmy old dame with far too much money. I've always been a nitwit all my days. Still, in my own very odd way I've had a lot of fun, and when my head cleared now and then I wasn't quite as loony as everybody thought. Life's a hell of a pot-mess, Peter. I don't think I could have competed with it for over sixty years if I'd been sane. Let's have another little drink together, Peter, whilst we've the chance."

Simon filled their glasses.

"To you, dear son!"

"To you, dear mum!"

Doll's eyes smiled into gypsy's eyes above the beaded, golden glass, and gypsy's eyes smiled back.

"Down the hatch!—and bottoms up!"

"Down the hatch!—and bottoms up!"

The Countess held out the empty glass towards Simon and signed for him to do the same. She struck his glass sharply with hers and both were shattered with a tinkling sound.

"Just an old Russian custom!" said the Countess, and she laughed, gaily and deeply.

The gramophone was playing another waltz, and the deck reminded Simon again of the kaleidescope which had once been his. A naughty expression came over his mother's face. The baby was up to mischief.

"No one's looking, boy," she chuckled. "Let's just you and I light the candles, and blow 'em out together."

The bit of fun appealed to Simon.

"Come on, let's, mum!"

Dr. John's lighter set all the little spears of flame burning redly.

"Blow away, mum!"

"You must blow, too, son. Alone I haven't the breath."

Side by side they bent and puffed.

The little spears bent and broke and vanished. Blue threads of smoke drifted. Their prank had passed unnoticed. Mother and son felt childish and young and gleeful. Simon kissed her regardless of make-up. Her lips trembled on his, happy but also somewhat tired.

"There," said the Countess, resuming her chair. "We fooled them all that time. That was just right and as it should have been. I'm a lucky old woman, and it's a lovely birthday because of you. They'll all be back soon. I think I'll take a little nap before I hear my fate." She sat back in her chair, and closed her eyes as Simon had seen her do so often before. When his mother had fancied a nap he had never disturbed her. Her lips moved, but he couldn't catch the words.

"What, mother?"

The doll's eyes opened wide and again they looked into his, but they weren't smiling now.

"You're not going to marry that little Austrian bitch, are you, Peter?"

"Good lord, no, mum!" said Simon with utter conviction.

"You're so simple and so wise," said the Countess. "Bless you, dear son."

She closed her eyes again, soothed and content.

Caleb forced a way along the deck and beckoned Simon urgently. Careful not to disturb his mother, Simon tiptoed off to meet him, for quite evidently he brought important news. Perhaps Mr. Meggsy had decided to stage the mutiny now before everyone became too merry to understand what it was all about.

"Look lively, Simon!" said Caleb in a hoarse whisper, and forged back through the dancers who didn't wear stays.

The storm had crept unnoticed from the rim of the world. A great sheet of lightning blazed and thunder split the black sky overhead.

IV

The tattooed arm thrust the door open.

"The Old Man," said Caleb, "wanted a call at six bells to alter course. Not that it would have mattered, because of you-know-what, but still I looked around and as I couldn't find him on topside I come down here. Get an eyeful for yourself."

He stood aside, and Simon stepped into Captain Pamphillion's cabin. All was very quiet in there, though the dance music drifted in faintly from above and the thunder growled. Dr. John sat on the settee behind the small table, his little bony arms flung out, his little claws clutching empty air in search of support. In the middle of his parchment-skinned, bulging skull was a neat hole from which blood had trickled, congealing over his pointed face. His bright bat's eyes, glazed now, looked emptily at emptiness. Captain Pam sprawled back, a pricked balloon, in his fine mahogany chair. An overturned glass lay on the table, and in his large right hand, clenched in death, was a revolver. The air was heavy with a smell of almonds.

"Easy to see what happened," Caleb whispered, hushed and hoarse. "They was having one of their friendly chats, and Captain Pam suddenly realized his buddy had bumped him off with poison, but before he passed out he had time to draw his gun and fix Dr. John."

"Yes," said Simon, "that must have been it. Dr. John knew Captain Pam hadn't any sense of smell. They were always finding out things like that about each other."

"Spike'll have to take over the navigating," said Caleb, "and I better tell Mr. Meggsy. Perhaps there won't be no need for that mutiny after all."

"Perhaps not," said Simon. "Just give me ten minutes or so to explain to the Countess."

"Sure, sure," said Caleb. "We don't want any bother if we can avoid it. There's been enough of that. Mr. Meggsy will see it your way."

Simon remained a moment in the silent white box. He

seemed to hear a faint chirp from the past, already left astern: *A femme fatale.* It meant, as Dr. John had explained, that the Countess was a kind of fatal woman. Here were two more suitors who had found that out. He considered the dead men. He had seen dead men before but never two as foolishly dead as these. If only they hadn't been so clever, so cunning, so greedy, so full of plots and plans, they might have been alive at this moment—and life was very good. All the Countess's millions didn't mean a thing to them now. They'd had it.

V

On deck they were tangoing with more abandon than previously, but now Captain Pamphillion wasn't Hansi's partner and Dr. John wasn't proposing to the Countess.

The rain hadn't come yet, but the thunder and lightning held high carnival, drowning the little brightness of the yacht, drowning the little music of the gramophone.

The Countess slept in her chair, fan on bosom, head lolling, plumes dipped to one side. Simon hated the thought of disturbing her, but, in view of Mr. Meggsy's plans he felt it was his duty.

"Mother," he said, "mother."

The Countess slept.

He put his hand on her bare shoulder, and the flesh struck cold and unnatural.

A sheet of lightning bathed her in the white brilliance of space.

Simon saw that his mother had died in her sleep. The great, soft dimpled baby had left the *Stormalong*. She had escaped from all the plans and complexities. There was a little smile on her lips which showed behind the smudged paint. The white ostrich feathers were like the plumes on a child's hearse.

Captain Pam and Dr. John needn't have bothered.

Simon's eyes softened in tenderness, but no tears came. A happy ending, come to think. There hadn't been much future in it for her.

VI

That careful planner, Mr. Meggsy, had brought a box with him to serve as a platform. He stepped up on it, and Spike, the new navigator, and Caleb and the two engineers were ranged about him. The *Stormalong* pulsed on. For these few moments it didn't matter that there was nobody at the wheel, and the lively gnome in the binnacle was wandering where it willed. A hush had fallen, but the thunder rolled. Mr. Meggsy, hand on high, waited for the wrathful heavens to be silent.

"Ladies," he said then, and his voice was loud and his face shone with a high purpose, "you are saved from worse than death. Even had the Lord not struck down the evil ones, we were making ready to snatch you from the burning. There'll be no brothels of Alexandria for you. We are turning the yacht about and taking you back to the decent life and safety. You are saved! No Alexandria to-morrow. Fear not! You are in good hands. You have cause to thank the Almighty."

He flung his arms wide, freeing the white slaves, striking off the manacles of shame.

There was a pause, whilst even those who could understand English, puzzled this out. Then all at once, Zaza, and Caleb's red-head, and probably Fifi, and others were the speakers. They explained what had been said in shrill, indignant screams: they waved their arms; they danced but not as they had danced before. In an instant the merry throng had been transformed into a furious mob.

"Alexandria!"

It was a battlecry, a war whoop. With variations of accent, it burst from every throat. Hands clawed and fists waved; there was a wild surge forward, and Mr. Meggsy and his men were buried under an avalanche of savagely indignant girlhood.

Simon, remote in the background, smiled somewhat sadly. He saw that even the best laid plans of righteous men came to nothing aboard the *Stormalong*. No matter how he felt, Mr. Meggsy's motors would drive the yacht on to Alexandria to-morrow afternoon.

A zigzag spear of lightning struck down, and all the festive lights went out. The party was over.

VII

"Great gracious," said Hansi, clinging wildly to Simon in the deep darkness, "then I am finding you at last. All I have just heard, and the Dogs' will I have found and burned. So now, mine lover, all is well and we are those great rich happy millionaires and shall to marry."

Her face was a white blur, her body ardent. Simon's mood, after all that had happened, was more than usually gentle and compassionate.

"Poor little Hansi!" he said, and he kissed her mouth.

"Rich little Hansi!" she answered, with that wicked, hushed laugh.

Lightning again. Simon saw her flower face, and Hansi saw his expression of pity and a kind of quiet amusement. She started back, alarmed, aghast. The thunder cracked and boomed and stopped.

"Hansi," Simon said kindly, "it didn't matter about the will. I wasn't the Countess's son, and I haven't got a bean."

"You were not her son?"

"Of course not. Any of the crew will tell you that. I've been wanting to explain, but somehow we always had such fun that the right time never came. I'm Simon Smith. Just a nobody. Simple Simon, they always call me. I couldn't marry you anyway, because I'm married, worse luck, to Daphne."

As ever, even in that moment and the pitch blackness, the truth of his words was crystal clear and beyond all doubt or question.

Hansi said something in what must have been Austrian and her voice had no sweetness. She gave Simon a wild, furious, sudden push.

VIII

The water was beautifully warm, warmer than it had been that night off Jersey. The lifebelt splashed quite near him, and he only had to reach out his hand to grasp it. Whether Hansi, in a sudden return of love, had flung it was another of the

mysteries of the *Stormalong* which would never be answered. He remembered Spike's advice, and lifted the thing over his head. It was a good tip all right. The belt fitted comfortably under his arms.

Hot rain was beating down now, chattering on the sea. The *Stormalong* was a pale white smudge receding into the dark, heading on for Alexandria. The waves she stirred up died down. When the lightning came again, the sea was white and still, all pockmarked by the rain.

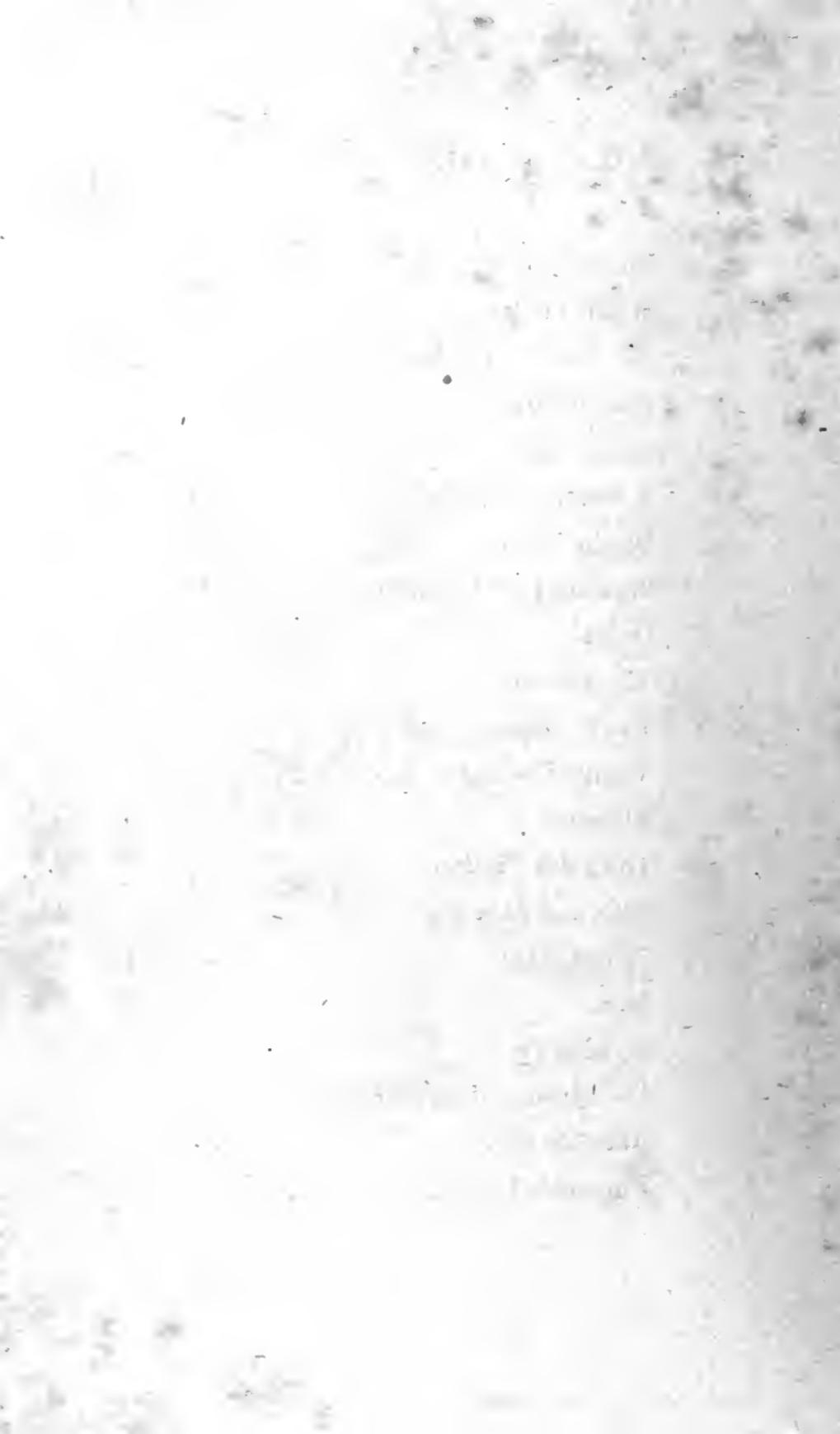
Simon drifted peacefully. So it was over; now he was part of the *Stormalong's* past, left behind, of no account. That suited him very well. He had never foreseen this or plotted to bring it about. He had had no plans. And yet here he was still afloat on the wide sea, free from the yacht and free for whatever might follow. Remembering his voyage in the apple-faced Irishman's rubber ring he was unafraid and at ease. It would be fun to see what chanced along next. That, it seemed to him, was the only way to enjoy life.

He laughed all at once.

"Still just like the Regal at Blickington," said Simple Simon in his simple way. "This is where I came in!"

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